NAG

VOL 10 ISSUE 4 07.2007

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING GAMING, COMPUTER & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

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ON THE DVD

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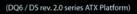
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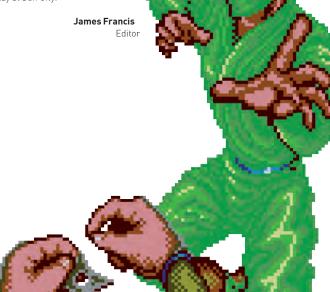
I **COMPLETELY AGREE WITH A** publisher trying to make an honest buck. So, I don't mind the licensed games, the sequels and the endless expansions. These, after all, serve a purpose and people clearly want them. You or I might not, but someone does. It keeps the wheels greased. I often tell people who complain about licensed games that without the cash from these titles, publishers won't have the capital to take risks on new IP or ambitious game designs. Games like *Gears of War*, *Spore* or *GTA* are not developed on shoestring budgets.

However, there's a line publishers cannot cross. I've long felt that the relentless charging for downloadable content from LIVE was not wise and established that the gaming audience is nothing more than another faceless consumer base for many companies. The latest LIVE update has shunted Microsoft into the other side of the field and off my Christmas list. If you haven't noticed yet, only a person who bought a game from LIVE Arcade can now play the full thing. All the other console profiles are stuck with the trial versions. Now, at face value this makes perfect sense: Microsoft figured out that there are a few users per console whom it could milk for some cash. However, it raises two serious concerns. The first is that Microsoft decided, after the fact, what I can and cannot do with the game I bought. I grew up as a habitual pirate, but I've spent a lot of money buying LIVE games. I love the system. I also happened to love the fact that anyone on my console could enjoy that game. Now they are all screwed. Microsoft could have easily just linked the game to the hardware, thus stopping piracy to other machines. But this decision wasn't made because of piracy. It's greed and that raises the second, much more worrying, concern about this whole event.

Microsoft cares about cash, not gamers, and this is slowly killing the 360. Peter Moore could tattoo a rebuttal across his chest and I still won't believe it. The company realised that the 360 has nice revenue potential. This is the same Xbox family, which until the 360's arrival, most executives at Redmond just rejected. Now they're all over it like badgers at a honey-truck accident scene. At the same time, several key members of the team, like Kevin Bacchus and the founders of LIVE Arcade, have left the company. Is the 360 vision lost? I think so. The console is fast changing from a console for gamers to a means for Microsoft to squeeze our pennies out of us. I adore the 360: it was fast becoming my all-time favourite. It's still awesome, but I cannot support LIVE anymore. Especially in the light that the games that I bought I'm only allowed to use according to whatever Microsoft decides. Screw LIVE – as long as the games I buy cannot be enjoyed by everyone who uses my console, then I don't see why I should support the service. Instead, I'll just watch as Microsoft's greedy decision makers drive the platform into oblivion.

In other news, a really, really big apology to all the *Guild Wars* players. We've never received so many angry letters and phone calls about anything else. I hope you enjoy the tardy mini pet code. Finally, it's been requested that I should mention the *Rainbow Six* competition. So, be sure to find it in this mag and SMS to win a stay at Sun City.

James Francis
Editor

What are we doing tonight, Brain? The same thing we do every night: try to take over the world!

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HERO OF THE DAY

SUPERHERO: beelZemon
CRISIS: Pro-gaming Menace

SOME PEOPLE TAKE GAMES just too seriously! Firstly, what do I think a pro-gamer is? Someone who spends way too much time playing games and get so good at it that they stop playing for the fun of it, but instead for the fame and fortune. Pro-gamers' must just relax for a while and have fun. Just the other day, I went to an Internet café with some of my friends. Some of the guys there played *ESF*. I joined the *ESF* guys while my friends were playing *Counter-Strike*. I don't know if I just suck at *ESF*, but those guys really gave me a hard time. They didn't even look like they enjoyed kicking my ass. The looks on their faces were of pure determination. Games shouldn't be taken that seriously. Okay, maybe if you are in a on-on-one match with Fatal1ty and $6,000 were on the line. Why do some people have to go make it their occupation? I also play games competitively, but not on the level of those so-called pro-gamers. What if everyone starts playing just for the fame? Shall we still be able to call games 'games'? Anyway, as I was saying, weren't games made just to have fun in the first place?

Here at the League of Superheroes we don't take exception to anyone trying to make an honest day's wages, all while giving back to the community. Your negative opinion on pro-gamers is completely uncalled for. These normal men and women not only spend every day honing their skills, even though they will never reach the magnificence of our members, but through that they keep the Internet café industry going. If it weren't for potential pro-gamers, who would be supporting the 20-a-day burger habit the guy behind the counter has to support? Who would trash newbies, forcing them to spend more money or run away crying? If it will make you feel better, for every pro-gamer there's a girlfriend left unattended. Go attend!

SUPERHERO: RyDen
CRISIS: Calling All Fanboys

THIS LETTER IS DIRECTED towards all fanboys, of both the PC and console persuasion. All of you, every last one, need to shut the hell up! A little blunt and not very well worded, but you get the point.

Why is it that so few people can see the merits of both PC gaming and console gaming? These narrow-minded individuals cannot (or will not?) see the good and bad points of both. First, the PC. Yes, they are very expensive, and from my experience, unreliable. However, they are upgradeable and always on the forefront of hardware technology (even if said hardware is never pushed anywhere near its limits). To remain on that forefront though, you need to upgrade every six months, but you still have the option.

Second, consoles. These machines are much cheaper and more reliable. But they become outdated very quickly and require a good TV (preferably high def). They also have a much longer life span than any PC hardware, and 'Game Requirements' never need to be checked.

So, PCs are expensive but powerful, and consoles are cheap but become outdated within months. If you, however, will argue to the death that one is better than the other, you, unfortunately, are not a gamer. A true gamer will play and appreciate a good game, no matter what you have to play it on.

I doubt I'll have changed anyone's mind as to how they view the PC or console, but I hope you'll at least think about it. I don't have the money for a good PC right now, so the Xbox 360 will keep me going until I can get a job. But I'm not complaining, because of three little words: *Gears of War*.

We asked PC Man for feedback on your claims and he said that he'd be flying past your house tomorrow to beat you up a little. Since the League doesn't encourage this type of behaviour, we'll help you out by suggesting you develop the Vista superpower. It brings PC Man crashing down every time.

SUPERHERO: Louis Steyn
CRISIS: Beta Games

RIGHT NOW, I'M QUITE furious. I just purchased two games, and both of them are unfinished, buggy Beta products. The title I'd like to bitch about is *Silent Hunter 4*. How can a publisher allow a game to be shipped in such an incomplete state? Once again, we were promised the world, and given nothing. The game was supposed to be an awesome cinematic experience with cut-scenes and totally reworked mechanics. What we got is an empty shell with a slightly altered interface. The graphics look brilliant, but the rest of the game is only the ghost of its older brother, *SH3*. Huge parts of the Campaign mode are actually MISSING, and that's after installing a 116MB patch! Search all you like, you won't find enemy ships, and the manual targeting system is broken. The upgrade and maintenance systems don't make sense, and you cannot remap the controls. The 'improved' event camera is disabled by default, and you need to edit the .ini files to turn it on. Half the interface buttons are missing, and the 'Maintain Depth' button crashes the game. Should I go on? Somewhere there's a serious lack of quality control if a renowned developer like Ubisoft ships a Beta game. I won't even mention the other game, which I uninstalled in disgust after patching and struggling for two days. Something to do with radioactivity. Yes, you guessed it.

This terrible injustice will not go unpunished. As you read this, the League has sent out top superheroes to beat up random Ubisoft developers. Except Jade Raymond - the league doesn't want to spoil any chances it might have to score with her. We also had Cliffy B beaten up, just for the hell of it.

SUPERHERO: Dominic Shipley
CRISIS: Old Games

DON'T YOU GUYS THINK that some older games are better than the newer games? Say, for example, the game *Shinobi*. Now, that was one excellent game (well, I've only played the demo). Anyway, I think they should make another version of the *Shinobi* game. I just think ninjas are way cool with their shurikens and the Ninjitsu moves. Remember Vamp from the game *MGS2* with his shadow-binding power? To me, games with some sort of powers are very cool (i.e. *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*). It's been proven that games with some sort of telekinesis or mind power are very interesting. Those type of games should still be available – I just can't find *Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*. That must be one of the best *Star Wars* games I have played.

It's been proven that games with some sort of telekinesis are good? Yeah, sure, why not. We'll believe anything once. We did a quick poll among all the League members who can do stuff with their heads, and they all concurred that it's an awesome ability. Even the Head-butter gave it a thumbs up and all he can really do is ram his head through things. It's a hands-on kind of telekinesis.

SUPERHERO: Lydon da Rocha
CRISIS: Damn Computers

WELL, I'VE ALWAYS BEEN fine with computers, but hell, when it comes to games… Well they suck and yes, I know what your thinking. Yes, PCs are better for FPSs and RTSs, but it's just such a freaking waste of time. I mean, when you get a game you have to look at the requirements (and if you aren't a computer person, you'll buy the game anyway and get super p*ssed when it doesn't work) and then spend a whole hour installing four CDs. And what's with patches? You mean I spent a whole 300 bucks for a incomplete game? But the main reason I think many people are more into consoles these days is that playing a game on a PC is just way too expensive. All the games people actually want to play need a freaking expensive souped-up computer with the most expensive devices just to play a game. Well, anyway, I just think PC games are a waste when I have a perfectly good PS2 to just pop in a game and play instantly.

Look, your problems are way beyond our scope. It took three weeks for the League to figure out which side of the DVD should be facing up. We eventually discovered our mistake when we rotated the console flat from its sideways position.

> **Why is it that so few people can see the merits of both PC gaming and console gaming? These narrow-minded individuals cannot (or will not?) see the good and bad points of both.**

ON THE FORUM

Infinitely_Blue: Pro-gaming is a definite up-and-coming sport for the next generation. It also helps give those who cannot compete in regular sports a chance to represent their countries.

Xennox: Pro-gaming, unless you are really into it, is not going to fly. Personally, I don't follow it.

Stunt: Playing for a top SA *BF2/2142* team, I definitely do keep track of pro-gaming. Since way back when Fatal1ty was in "bk," I've been following the pro-gaming scene. I do classify it as a sport of sorts and know that it takes a lot of time and dedication to excel in it, as with any other sport.

H3adSho7: Having a competition to see who can play a game the best is like having a competition to see who can read a book the best; it's stupid and silly. Playing a game is an experience (including the MP part), not a sport.

BraZeD: I don't follow pro-gaming, for the simple reason that this side of the world, it hasn't evolved into much of a spectator sport. Sure, you hear about a crowd standing and shouting at big events, but that's the only place it happens, and then 90% of the crowd wasn't there for that in the first place.

Turk1sh: I think it's the way of the future and totally enjoy it.

Mrdevil: I respect the skill of pro-gamers, but to me it is a poor spectator sport. I don't follow it anymore than I follow competitive darts, which is actually more fun to watch.

Tr00jg: My history of following pro-gaming is as reliable as Eskom. I used to watch *Warcraft III* replays a lot, up to the point where I discovered you have to make it your life if you want to compete against the top guns.

Jub Jub: Pro-gaming is one the world's fastest growing 'sports', but as long as the media are attacking the industry, I feel that it's not really worth going crazy for.

Metroid: I've nothing against pro-gaming, but I feel there is a limited number of games (and genres) that are played competitively. Why don't we have more *Soul Calibur* tournaments? Why must pros choose one game, play that game for seven years, and cling onto it for eternity?

KingSushi: Yes I support it. But I think more people would if it gets televised.

Garson007: As long as there is no single platform (read: game) on which this will transpire, it will never evolve into a simple, easy to follow sport.

> **I think trying to spice up the mag with new content is a great idea. I just can't understand why on earth everyone seems so upset about it changing.**

SUPERHERO: J.C. Cloete
CRISIS: Why all the criticism?

FIRST, I LOVE READING this magazine and enjoy the way it is presented. Being a big fan of *Guild Wars*, I loved your preview of *Guild Wars 2*. I also think trying to spice up the mag with new content is a great idea. I just can't understand why on earth everyone seems so upset about it changing. They just moan and moan and moan. It can only become better, right? I am sure there are loads of people who love this magazine just like me. But I think they might be getting the wrong impression of what the rest of the public think. They are reading all these letters from people who seem to enjoy stomping on the mag's head. Why don't you publish some fun letters or letters from people who compliment instead of criticise the mag? In a way, I can also understand the decision to publish the criticisms. You are worried these people think you don't take their criticisms to heart. Maybe you should create a column in your mag to publish all this 'constructive criticism'. Be sure to add each other's contact details so that they can comfort each other. Maybe they want to go to group therapy?

Ha! You fell for the oldest trap in the book! By printing all those negative letters, we were hoping a superhero would rise to the occasion and defend the bastion that is the Superhero Council! But in effect, all you've done is establish that you'll quickly fall for any evil genius' plan to trap you in a steel cage suspended above a scorpion pit. For this reason, we have to decline your application for a sidekick. You're just not ready. But we have to at least commend you for your loyal support and keen insight. Those must be superpowers too.

SUPERHERO: Hardus van der Merwe
CRISIS: PhysX – Bullsh*t or not?

I'M IN A BIT of a predicament at the moment with this PhysX thing. At first, I didn't even give it a second thought because the last thing I needed was another piece of hardware that would need upgrading eventually. So, since this past weekend, I have completely forgotten about this damned PhysX card – that is until two new games I played installed software for it. There's one guaranteed way of getting people to buy your product, and that's letting them think they NEED it! And they accomplish this by restricting access to certain levels because of EXTREME Physics and the need for a PhysX card. So I joined the gravy-train for a bit until I realised it's BULLSH*T.

It's too expensive to start with, and if the people at AMD are trying to fuse a CPU and GPU together, what's to stop them or NVIDIA from fusing PhysX and GPU together, which is inevitable. So, even if I'm wrong and the masses start buying these PhysX cards, they can either become cheaper or the more realistic option: they start offering buyers low-end and high-end options. Which is why I stick to the BULLSH*T argument.

What kind of a superhero identity is Hardus van der Merwe? It doesn't roll off the tongue and probably barely fits on the snappy logo you wear on your chest. Need we remind you of League

rule #165.3, which states that all members will have names that go well with headlines. Onto your problem, we understand that you have a problem with physics (or PhysX as you cryptically refer to it). Well, sorry, you can't fight that. It's hardwired into the whole system. The best you can do is bend it a little or fly around because your own planet's gravity is more than the one you are currently on. Has anyone told Superman that it actually makes no sense at all? But it's unavoidable. The good news is that it's so unavoidable that you're right: it will probably appear on a graphics card soon enough.

SUPERHERO: Kundai Murapa
CRISIS: All that Piracy

NAG IS THE MAG, and your 172-page April issue reaffirmed your status as the southern hemisphere's greatest multi-platform gaming mag. With the increase in bandwidth and Internet speed, we've seen the advent of software such as LimeWire and BitTorrent coupled with things like Alcohol 120%. This has led to the birth of another highly controversial practice: piracy. I recently purchased *C&C3 TW* (fantastic game, thanks for the patches). Two days later, I was googling for a walkthrough, and what did I find? Several different cracks and even downloadable full versions of the game. It's so easy to download and pirate games at home that even the pirates are going to be put out of business. This dilemma has led to the mass exodus of a lot of PC-exclusive development companies to the more stable console environment (which is not completely immune to this problem either). Developers such as id and Epic are now converting their respective *Quake* and *Unreal* games for the console, and games, like Bethesda's *Oblivion*, have already made the jump to the 360 and PS3. Nowadays, if I want to borrow a game from a friend, he doesn't give me the authentic disk to borrow for a couple of weeks. I'm the one who supplies him with a blank disk so he can 'alcohol' it for me along with the latest crack. I mean, it's cool getting free games, but in the end, it's a criminal practice and will ultimately see the demise of our beloved gaming industry. I'm stuck on the Croatia level of *C&C3*. HELP!!!

Unfortunately, our 124-page June issue reaffirmed our status as the southern hemisphere's second greatest gaming mag, once again giving Hot Chicks Playing Games its rightful place at the top. Onto piracy, the League takes a strong view on the practice of copying games, mostly because we don't know how to do it. But you are right – the Internet has made it so common that even salt-of-the-earth pirates can't make a dishonest living. The League of Supervillains compiled a report about the phenomenon last year, investigating the effect of non-commercial piracy on the operations of bad superheroes everywhere. The results were not encouraging and prompted a brief attack by them on BitTorrent share sites. But this put them into the same league as the RIAA and MPAA. Apparently, the League of Supervillains won't lower its standards that far. Oh, and do you mean that level with the turrets, low power and all the Nods attacking you? Everyone's stuck on that level. **NAG**

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WHAT ARE PETER JACKSON AND MICROSOFT DOING WITH HALO?

IT'S BEEN A WHILE since Microsoft and Peter Jackson announced a partnership at X06, which would see Jackson create 'interactive' titles that would mix movies and games. It now appears that the first of these titles might be based around the upcoming *Halo 3*. In an interview with Gamespy, Microsoft's Shane Kim mentioned that Jackson and Bungie were working closely together on a *Halo* project that joins in with the series.
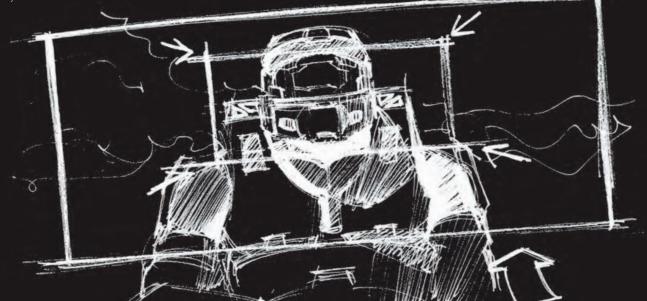
"I'm not sure about the specifics. They'll be done with *Halo 3* this year, but we haven't announced any dates on the *Halo 3* series," he told the gaming Website. Initially, though, the site misprinted a quote, creating the impression that the team is working on an animated Halo series, but it later corrected the mistake, stating that Kim had only referred to an interactive project. While that will no doubt be met favourably by fans, neither Jackson nor Bungie has revealed anything along those lines. The message is clear enough, though: nothing major will happen until *Halo 3* is finished.

The upcoming game release isn't just hotly anticipated by its fans. Jackson told New Zealand movie magazine, *OnFilm*, that he hoped *Halo 3*'s release would convince 20th Century Fox and Universal Pictures to reconsider the project, which was shelved last year for budget reasons. It was also rumoured that the studios weren't happy with the selection of new director, Neill Blomkamp. Nevertheless, Jackson and his co-producer, Fran Walsh, are convinced that he's the man for the project and are sticking to their guns.

"We wouldn't want to do it with anybody else," said Jackson. "It'll be Neill's call." Considering Jackson's past movie successes, perhaps the studios should listen.

STEAM STILL HOT

TWO AND HALF YEARS ago, Steam launched alongside the much-anticipated *Half-Life 2*. Originally, it was meant to be a way to update Valve games, but has quickly grown into an established digital delivery method, playing host to a variety of game partners and their catalogues, such as Eidos and Activision. Steam has grown to deliver trailers, demos and more. The obvious success of Steam is marked with the recent milestone of 13 million active accounts. Xbox LIVE only recently managed to hit the six million active account mark.

Recently, AMD partnered with Valve to offer free Steam games to ATI Radeon owners. New adopters signing up for an account at Steampowered.com will have their card detected, becoming eligible for free copies of *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* and *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*.

Focus Home Interactive has also signed a digital delivery deal with Valve, offering *TrackMania United* on Steam.

"As an unrivalled digital distribution platform, Steam is the ideal vehicle to introduce *TrackMania United* to audiences around the world," said Cedric Lagarrigue, COO at Focus Home Interactive.

MAN PWNS GRANDMOTHER'S CREDIT CARD FOR FINAL FANTASY

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD LANCE SEAMAN FROM Mesa, Arizona, was found to have used his grandmother's credit card without her permission to buy over $10,000 worth of *Final Fantasy* figurines before finally being apprehended by the police. According to the police report, Seaman confessed to also having stolen his grandmother's computer and camcorder back in May, later pawning them for a paltry $200.

Mesa Police reported that they had seized twenty boxes of *Final Fantasy* figurines as evidence from Seaman's bedroom before the arrest was made. The police were informed of Seaman's possible credit card fraud by his grandmother.

It is not yet known of Seaman's grandmother will be pressing charges, or what kind of penalty Seaman may face.

Steam users will be able to buy Capcom's PC titles on Steam. The publisher is the first Japanese company to sign up with Valve's service and will offer *Lost Planet*, *Onimusha 3* and *Devil May Cry 3*, with more to come.

Two thieves who broke into a Florida, US, home got more than they bargained for. The duo woke up a 15-year-old teenager (who has a brown belt in karate), who spooked them off with a samurai sword when they tried to nab his **PlayStation 3**. One of the burglars was arrested.

Reports online revealed that a group of hackers has apparently cracked the **PlayStation 3's anti-piracy code**. Sony struck back, saying it will aggressively pursue anyone who attempts to do any such thing with legal action.

Ubisoft's CEO told Reuters that while the publisher wants to keep its books in the green, it's on the lookout for acquisitions. The company has been enjoying a bumper few years and recently closed its financial year with a healthy profit.

Sam & Max and *Bone* developer, not to mention episodic pioneer, **Telltale Games**, has secured $6 million in investment cash. The company plans to hire more staff and expand to multiple platforms.

THE CASUAL GAMES REVOLUTION BEGINS

THE CASUAL GAMING MARKET is set to become big business, as industry behemoths turn their attentions to this as-yet mostly untapped resource. EA recently announced the formation of its EA Casual Entertainment studio, headed by former Activision president, Kathy Vrabeck. "All over the world, consumers are playing games that don't require hours of intense concentration," said Vrabeck. "The common denominator is casual fun [and] quick-to-the-fun games are bringing new players and new demographics to interactive entertainment."

Ubisoft, meanwhile, has begun its own casual gaming division, focusing development on its own My Coach interactive learning series, as well as its multi-million selling Petz franchise, for DS and Wii. "The timing is right for us to leverage our creativity and to open up the videogames market to new consumers who will be attracted by content that can help them learn, grow and feel better in an entertaining way," said Yves Guillemot, Ubisoft CEO.

Casual gaming kingpin, PopCap, isn't feeling threatened by this newfound corporate interest, however. "It increases the legitimacy and visibility of the whole casual field," James Kapalka, PopCap chief creative officer, told GamesIndustry.biz in a recent interview. "It helps people to see that it's a real and serious form of gaming and part of the gaming business, [and] anything that increases the exposure of the casual market is good for us all."

What this all boils down to, presumably, is something a little more exciting than Solitaire for cubicle dwellers to play when their supervisors are looking the other way. And what next, we wonder. PeggleCon?

VIRGIN WANTS TO MAKE HOME LOOK OLD

IT'S NO SECRET THAT Sony is trying to launch an avatar-based PS3 version of Xbox LIVE. However, will it actually work as well as Sony hopes? Virgin doesn't seem to think so. The company is launching a PC equivalent called A World of My Own (AWOMO), which, according to the Virgin Games on Demand CEO, will make the PS3 Home feature look prehistoric. Even the guys at Microsoft have recently expressed their views, stating that the infrastructure alone, which would be needed to run PS3 Home, could lead to Sony's downfall in the market, an assumption that is relevant to AWOMO as well. However, the developers of AWOMO at Games Domain International have recently opened Beta testing of the service anyway. They claim that their version will have superior download speeds and they hope to have half a million subscribers by the end of this year still. So far, the feedback on AWOMO has been good. Nevertheless, will what Microsoft said about Home become true for AWOMO as well? Time will tell.

SA COMICON ANNOUNCED

THE SOUTH AFRICAN COMIC Convention has been announced for August and will feature both up-and-coming artists and legends in the field, like international Marvel artist, Reilly Brown. If you're interested in checking it out, entrance fees are quite cheap, starting at only R30 for a day pass and R80 for a weekend pass. There will be a Cosplay event as well as model kit competitions and various comic workshops hosted by ComicWorx. There will also be a comic storyboard competition and various local comic signings. The event will be hosted in the huge Sisulu hall in Randburg. Visit www.sacomiccon.co.za for more information.

ID SOFTWARE, CARMACK GOOD FOR ONE MORE

AFTER *DOOM 3*, PRACTICALLY everyone expected John Carmack to hang up his Game Engine Wizard hat and cloak and focus more on his attempts to shoot man into space, affordably. It seems that the programming guru still has one last trick up his sleeve, however, as id Software has unveiled that its new game engine, titled Tech 5, will be Carmack-powered.

At Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference in San Francisco, the new engine was shown running on a Mac and id stressed that it would be available for licensing to third parties.

The demonstration showcased the "insanely detailed world" that used over 20GB of textures and looked as pretty as one would expect from a tech demo of a new id Software engine. The engine will be used to power a new id Software game that has yet to be mentioned, but it has been confirmed that it will be an entirely new game not based on any previous id titles.

E3 NOW ONLY FOR THE US

"**E3 IS NOW ONLY** for the US, so we wanted to do something to help everybody see our products." This was the opinion of Yves Guillemot, Ubisoft's CEO, during his opening speech at the recent Ubidays event. He declared this as the industry felt the notable lack of excitement and chaos that usually surrounds this time of year thanks to the massive expo. Through the Ubidays event, Ubisoft aimed to fill that gap for the European press and several hundred industry professionals attending the two-day event covering Ubisoft's extensive line-up. Nevertheless, the company still plans to appear at the new E3 later this year. Later, *Assassin's Creed* producer, Jade Raymond, placed a bit of a damper on Guillemot's comments when she revealed that the first playable code of the game would appear at E3. Meanwhile, another European trade show has been announced. According to its organisers, Gameplan will take place next year in June and give the industry the chance to do business without the distractions of stands and booths.

GAMES COST TOO MUCH, SAY EXPERTS

AND THEY DON'T NEED degrees in rocket science, either. Revolution Software's (*Broken Sword*, *Beneath a Steel Sky*) Charles Cecil feels that game price tags are hampering sales, not least of all because not all games are created equal.

"*Gears of War* was clearly a blockbuster. People are happy to pay £40 for that and feel it's good value," he said in an interview with GamesIndustry.biz. "But then, we have all these smaller games like *Katamari Damacy* that get very well reviewed and perceived very fondly by people within the industry, but don't sell to a wider audience. My view on that is you can only sell something for £40 if it's truly epic."

Telltale Games executive, Kevin Bruner, echoed this sentiment, adding that "I much prefer to [develop episodic content] than spend two years [developing] a game that comes out and if you screw something up, there's no opportunity to fix it - you just move on and do something else. I think once you get over the production challenges of creating a game a month, then it's a really attractive model to be in."

He makes an excellent point. Who's going to bitch about a crap game if it cost only $9?

SQUARE: FFXIII FOR 360? NAH

FINAL FANTASY HAS ALWAYS been a PlayStation exclusive series until recently when a port came out for the 360, but so far, it seems to be the only 360 port coming out any time soon. According to Square Enix's Shinji Hashimoto, there aren't any plans as yet for the 360 console. There are, however, *Final Fantasy* games being developed for both the Wii and PS3. This could signal doom for the Xbox 360 JRPG platform and give the PS3 a boost. It does mean that either way, *Final Fantasy* fans must consider buying either a Wii or PS3 for future games in the series.

"GAME-RELATED" TROUBLE ON THE INCREASE; WELL-ADJUSTED GAMERS LET DOWN BY IDIOTS

OH, AND THEY'RE AT it again. First up, English college student, Dominic Anderson. This charming lad spent an evening huffing petrol (or something) and playing *Saints Row*, and then embarked on a crusade of 'Let's murder everything in the neighbourhood'. After running amok in the streets for a while, he was apprehended and subdued by baton-wielding police and dragged off to the slammer.

Meanwhile, Nintendo has *Manhunt 2* pegged for a Wii port. That's right: the revolutionary Wii controller, lauded for its unprecedented degree of user interactivity, will now enjoy all sorts of interesting applications in the sequel to a game detractors declared "a murder simulator". Okay, perhaps it was a somewhat myopic decision on Nintendo's part, especially given the "family friendliness" of the console, but that's nothing an R-rating won't remedy. Besides, Nintendo is keeping its hands clean, saying that the game "[is] not developed or published by Nintendo. It is one of many titles released by third-party publishers for our system." Of course, Jack Thompson, hovering vulture that he is, is already all over the controversy, somewhat predictably hailing the controller "a training device."

And from the mundanely inevitable to the somewhat bizarre. The Christian Science Monitor and National Wildlife Federation are claiming that videogames (along with cellphones, TV, and petrol costs) are the reason for declining attendance figures at American national parks. Apparently, this generation has developed a "nature deficit disorder." Which is, of course, ridiculous. It's because you can't plug a 360 into a tree.

MANDATORY GAME MOVIE NEWS

DESPITE HOW AWFUL SOME may think they are, movies based on games are part of our lives, and this has been confirmed by a slew of new game movie announcements. It's hard to decide where to start, so perhaps the silliest announcement is most apt. Reports have surfaced that 20th Century Fox secured the rights for a *Sims* movie. It apparently already has a script, penned by the same person who brought us *Scary Movie 3*. If you're perplexed about the concept of a film based on a life simulator game, take comfort in *Transformers* producer Tom DeSanto's mention that he wants to make a *City of Heroes* movie, based on the popular MMO. Will it be the first movie to star a few hundred Spider-Man look-alikes? The news does get a bit saner. A *King of Fighters* movie is in pre-production at the moment, but details have been kept under wraps, except that *Fist of Legend* director, Gordan Chan, is in charge. Meanwhile, the *Spyhunter* movie now has Paul "*Resident Evil*" Anderson at the helm, set to direct the on-off-on-again feature. Fortunately, *Silent Hill* director, Christophe Gans, is also working on a new game movie deal for the epic action series, *Onimusha*. Finally, while they technically weren't games first, it's worth mentioning that movie versions of *G.I. Joe*, *Thundercats* and *Monopoly* are being planned. Yes, as in the board game. Yes, they will make anything into a movie these days, won't they?

THE EVOLUTION OF: CONSOLE CONTROLLERS

Atari 2600 (1977)

Nintendo Entertainment System (1985)

Nintendo 64 (1996)

Sony PlayStation Dual Analog (1997)

Microsoft Xbox 360 (2005)

Nintendo Wii (2006)

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

NEWGROUNDS RUMBLE
[http://www.kongregate.com/games/NegativeONE/newgrounds-rumble]

IN AN INTERESTING COLLABORATIVE effort, *Newgrounds Rumble* pits various characters from favourite *Newgrounds* Flash animations against each other in a fun brawler that oozes quality. There are ten unique fighters, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, 11 combat arenas with various danger zones and reactive bits, and you can even unlock two additional characters, more power-ups and new game modes. You earn Grounds Gold (with which to unlock stuff) by playing the Story or Challenge modes. Two players can team up (on one keyboard) to take on the Story mode, which is a nice touch. The game mechanics roughly follow the *Super Smash Bros.* formula with a few changes here and there. The controls are a simplified light attack, heavy attack and block. Each character is superbly animated and the Action Cam adds a little spice to the mayhem by giving it that cinematic feel. It takes forever to load, even on ADSL, but it's worth it.

MOVERS & SHAKERS

BRAINS! NO, ONLY NEXT year. A Capcom financial report detailed that **Resident Evil 5** is only due next year – hopefully. | A new SimCity is on its way. Called **SimCity Societies**, the development will be handled by Caesar IV crew Tilted Mill. No platforms mentioned yet, but the PC is definitely one of them. | F1 fans should keep an eye out for **Grand Prix Tycoon**, an online game that will let you manage your own racing team. Champagne not included. | Bethesda has confirmed that **FallOut 3** will, apart from the PC, also appear on the PS3 and 360. | The climb-anywhere 'Sam Fisher in the Middle Ages' game, **Assassin's Creed**, has been scheduled for release in November this year. Yay! | Though there's no official word, according to retailer EB Games, **Metal Gear Solid 4** has been delayed until 2008. | A new **300** game is planned for next-gen consoles. So is a **SAW** adaptation. Will the game be as dull as the movie? | A **F.E.A.R.** sequel is coming! We know this because Vivendi launched a competition to name the next game. | The upcoming LEGO MMO has been named. It now carries the super-creative moniker of **LEGO Universe**. | Scared of the dark? Well, you'll be able to be **Alone in the Dark** when the game is released later this year, as confirmed by Atari. | **Halo 3** is coming! Not everyone liked the first two games, but if you did, you would be happy to hear that it will arrive September 26. | Redesigned time-shaping shooter, **Timeshift**, has now expanded to cover the PS3 as well. | Riddick is back! Starbreeze has announced that it's doing a redux version of **Butcher's Bay** for the 360, complete with an extra chapter. It's been too long... | A Ubisoft exec has let slip that a new **Deus Ex** game is in development. It doesn't look, though, like Warren Spector is involved. | Need more **Age of Empires** action? A new expansion has been announced. Called **The Asian Dynasties**, it will cover, as you might guess, Far Eastern ancient history. | **Crash Bandicoot** will soon return in a new adventure titled **Crash of the Titans**. Now Crash will be able to hijack enemies. More info soon. | **Warhawk** is back on Blu-ray. Actually, the game will now be sold online and on discs. If you get the latter, you'll get a free Bluetooth headset. | Will we see **Monkey Island 5** soon? The rumour is back, but we shouldn't forget that none of the original developers is still at LucasArts. Besides, didn't the company stop developing adventure games? | Despite all its incredible bugs, it seems that **Gothic 3** didn't kill the series. JoWood already announced a fourth game. However, the price has been paid – a new developer has been recruited for the project. | The **Need for Speed** series is still full of fuel. EA has announced the latest iteration, called **Pro Street**. | Developer, Red Mile Entertainment, is planning a **Sin City** game, based on the graphic novels. Frank Miller is collaborating. We guess the movie made him saw the real cash in his pet project. | The addictive Geometry Wars is heading towards the DS and Wii. Called **Geometry Wars: Galaxies**, it will feature a campaign mode. | Your virtual zoo will just keep growing: Microsoft has announced a new expansion for **Zoo Tycoon 2**, named **Extinct Animals**. | Kill us now. Someone is working on a game based on the ancient 1987 movie, **Dirty Dancing**. | Gametap will be distributing American McGee's new episodic game, **Grimm**. | Taito's interesting and innovative PSP platformer, **Exit**, is heading towards Xbox LIVE Arcade, but only the Japanese side. | Regardless of where the game ends up residing, Square-Enix has revealed that **Final Fantasy XIII** won't be out until April 2008. | Free Radical Design's shooter, **Haze**, though multi-platform, will reach only the PS3 this year and other platforms in 2008.

Bing Gordon, Executive Vice President of EA, told Gamasutra that *Spore* would have to sell millions of units and "last a few years" to make a profit. However, he reasoned that EA has to spend the money on something and it might as well be Will Wright's new baby.

Online game, *EVE Online*, is planning to hold **elections** that will establish certain players as ombudsmen. These players will then make sure developer, CCP, isn't cheating. The company was recently rocked by a scandal where some players apparently abused their roles as developers to get ahead in the MMO.

Konami and **Sony BMG** have struck a deal to bring Konami's entire game music library to iTunes. The songs will also feature on Konami's site, but pricing hasn't yet been announced.

Capcom was testing icon sizes on its site and accidentally placed the Wii symbol next to *Killer 7*. This caused a rumour that the game is heading to the console, but Capcom said this isn't the case.

The **God of War** team isn't working on *God of War 3*, yet. According to team leader Cory Barlog's blog, they are trying to think of something new to do.

NEW GAME DEVELOPMENT STUDIO SPLOSION!

FIVE EX-ELECTRONIC ARTS (AND Black Box Games) veterans have founded a new independent developer called Atomic Robot Games. They have worked on *Syphon Filter 1* and *2*, several *Need for Speed* games, *Full Auto*, *The Suffering*, several *NHL* games and the upcoming *Skate*.

The Canadian studio of Foundation 9, based on Prince Edward Island, has gone independent and been renamed Other Ocean, with the co-founder of F9, Andrew Ayer, at the helm. The Studio recently released *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* for Xbox LIVE Arcade, but hasn't announced future projects yet.

UK developer, Traveller's Tales (*LEGO Star Wars*), acquired Centroid Motion Capture Limited and as part of the deal, established a new company, TT Centroid Limited. Travellers Tales promises more *LEGO* titles.

A group of former Relic Entertainment (*Homeworld, Company of Heroes*) employees has teamed up to form a new studio under the name of Smoking Gun Interactive. The studio will be headed by Jon Johnson who worked on *Company of Heroes*. No details on the first project yet.

The former CEO of *Prey* developer, Human Head, is teaming up with other veterans to establish Big Rooster, another new development studio. There are promises of both original IP and licensed games, along with what seems to be a digital delivery focused approach.

BOILED DEUS: WOO AND SPECTOR TEAM UP!

WARREN SPECTOR (*SYSTEM SHOCK*, *Thief*, *Deus Ex*) has joined forces with John Woo (hyper-kinetic blockbuster action flicks) for *Ninja Gold*, a movie/game joint enterprise (with ninjas).
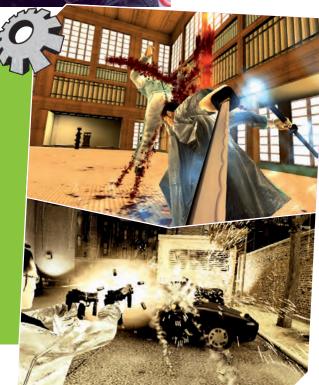
"I know that my thought from the start was to develop something that would work just as well in games as in movies, and I know John was thinking along the same lines," said Spector. "This was an attempt to create a concept that would work in, and be developed for, a variety of media simultaneously. That's something new for games and for movies."

Except that *Oddworld Inhabitants* thought of it first with Citizen Siege.

SONY'S ROUGH CONSOLE RIDE

THINGS AREN'T LOOKING GOOD for Sony at the moment, after reports from its fiscal year, which ended in March, surfaced. It appears that Sony has been running at a 68% loss in profits and accredits this to its games division and the fact that the PS3 has been selling for less than its production value. Only 5.5 million units have been shipped, with a sales figure of 3.6 million units being sold. However, both Sony's Sales and Net income have increased - by 10.5% and 2.2% respectively. Although Sony's games division has taken a beating with the PS3, Sony is happy with the sales figures of the PSP, which have increased its profit margin dramatically due to production cost reductions. Sony is also confident in its current fiscal year ending next March and is sure that the PS3 market will grow by the end of this period. This is also due to more people buying the PS3 for its Blu-ray playing capabilities.

FREE MOD OF THE MONTH

MAX PAYNE 2: ELEMENTS OF STYLE
[On the DVD]

AT A HEFTY 367MB, *Elements of Style* is pretty much the definitive mod for *Max Payne 2*. It takes the standard gameplay from *Max Payne 2* and completely refines it into a much more appealing and exciting experience that any *Max Payne 2* fan will appreciate. Some of the more noticeable changes include new atmospheric camera effects, such as camera shake when bullets fly by your head, bullet penetration through materials, improved grenade blasts that throw enemies across the room, new super Kung Fu that includes two new launch moves, new sweep kicks, new bullet-time cameras, new Kung Fu animations and even a few hidden Special Moves. Max Payne himself has been given a makeover with some new textures and new shaders applied to 95% of the character models in the game, as well as new high-poly weapon models. Basically, this is one kick-ass mod and if you have *Max Payne 2* on your shelf, dust it off and give this mod a look.

RESISTANCE: FALL OF MANCHESTER CATHEDRAL

SONY HAS FOUND ITSELF the target of divine fury as the Church of England considers legal action against the company. Sony's transgression? The PS3 launch title, Resistance: Fall of Man, features "a virtual shootout between rival gunmen with hundreds of people killed inside [Manchester] Cathedral." While "hundreds" is something of a hyperbole, the Church seems affronted simply because the cathedral is portrayed as an appropriate venue to discharge firearms.

"It is well known that Manchester has a gun crime problem," declared the Bishop of Manchester, Reverend Nigel McCulloch. "For a global manufacturer to recreate one of our great cathedrals with photo-realistic quality and then encourage people to have guns battles in the building is beyond belief and highly irresponsible."

Sony, meanwhile, was quick to point out the rather obvious: that the fantasy sci-fi game is set in an alternate reality. Nonetheless, Sony will be "contacting the Cathedral authorities in order to better understand their concerns in more detail."

A BEACON OF ORIGINALITY IN A SEA OF BEEN-THERE-BEFORES

IN A MARKET DOMINATED by sure-fire hit sequels, and despite enjoying enormous success with its own franchises, Ubisoft is risking the financial gamble and forging ahead with its own intellectual property and original games. From 2003's *Beyond Good and Evil*, and 2006 Wii launch title *Red Steel*, the company has enjoyed critical acclaim and considerable market success, and is now set to release the hotly-anticipated Crusades-era stealth romper, *Assassin's Creed*.

"We take great care with our existing franchises and work hard to innovate with each new episode," says Ubisoft Chief Creative Officer, Serge Hascoet. "At the same time, it's important to keep creating new IPs, using new types of gameplay, and reaching out for different audiences. Ubisoft has an edge in creation and innovation, but we need to stay on our toes to keep it. In any case, Ubisoft is full of amazing talent and they would go crazy if they couldn't invent new universes from time to time."

And just to keep those cogs turning, the company recently announced plans to expand its studio in Casablanca (Morocco), by creating 150 new jobs with the aid of a government-assisted incentive scheme intended to boost growth of the technology industry there.

For a brief moment many *Resident Evil* fans freaked out when it was revealed that the Wii remake of *Resident Evil 4* would be **censored**, with some elements of the violence removed. However, eventually it was also mentioned that *Resident Evil 4* was censored in Japan and only the Japanese Wii version would get this treatment. Okay, it's still bad news for the Japanese.

Fancy a game of *StarCraft*, but don't have a copy handy? If you have an Internet connection and a reasonable machine, you can take a look at the fan-made **Flash version**. It's not a direct remake of the game, but still worth a look at www.ugoplayer.com/games/starcraftfa3.html.

Epic netted another studio in its **Unreal Engine 3** trap. SEGA is the latest company to sign up for the engine license. It will be used by SEGA's two US studios.

The Godfather cost EA a pretty penny, likely more than the game really made. However, the publisher isn't done yet, and plans to release **five more titles** using the engine, including a *Godfather* sequel.

A pro-gaming channel has launched on UK satellite network, Sky. Called **Xleague.TV**, it features live and recorded matches, complete with commentary and analysis.

Apparently, the release of *Halo 2* for Vista was delayed because **partial nudity** was involved. An image residing in the map editor was apparently not appropriate, and Microsoft responded appropriately. Unfortunately, it didn't apologize for the game itself.

FORZA 2 STARTS SKIN CRAZE

WOULD YOU PAY REAL money for a good paint job in *Forza 2*? It seems to be the latest craze after the game was released with a Livery editor. Several auctions have already appeared on eBay selling these custom paint jobs for $10, with estimates that in the next few months more elaborate designs will find their way onto the market. So far, players cannot import their own pictures into the game, but rather design them using a set group of primitives and manipulating them into the shapes that they want using the Livery Editor to sculpt it. The whole process is tedious, but can have some spectacular results for the patient ones, and maybe even some profit for those who go as far as selling them on sites like eBay before more rulings come into effect stopping this. It's more good news for Microsoft though: in the long run, as this craze grows, so will 360 profits.

You can see an in-depth skin tutorial at http://forums.forzamotorsport.net/forums/thread/213264.aspx

WHAT'S WITH THE 360 DISC SCRATCHING?

EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR CONSUMERS, Meglena Kuneva, has demanded an explanation from Microsoft regarding the scratching of discs, as well as information about how the company intends to resolve the issue. This follows widespread complaints, as well as an exposé on Dutch consumer advocacy TV show, *Kassa*, which showed how the console can destroy discs.

The show reported that the problem is due to missing parts in the disc drive, usually responsible for stabilising the disc and preventing the drive's lens from coming into contact with the disc itself. This fault seems to occur in consoles manufactured during December 2006, and affects some 1-2 million units. Microsoft later issued a statement, saying that "[because] we did not participate in the experiment done by *Kassa* and have little insight into the methodology that was used, we cannot comment specifically on the outcome."

Kuneva has given Microsoft one week to explain. At the time of going to print, no answer has yet been received.

TWO STUDIOS SING THEIR SWAN SONGS

TWO MAJOR STUDIOS HAVE recently closed down or scaled down their operations. The first might cause a bit of confusion: Capcom has closed down Flagship, but not the developer working along with Namco-Bandai on *Hellgate*. Instead, it's the Flagship responsible for third-part Nintendo games like *Legend of Zelda*: The Minish Cap as well as several *Kirby* games that Capcom has achieved a lot of acclaim for. The company merged the veteran studio, which was found in 1997, into the larger corporation and no staff layoffs have been reported. Activision has done almost the same with Vicarious Visions' California Studio. While some of the staff will join the VV New York team, most will hit the unemployment lines. VV's California team was involved with some of the studio's top titles, such as the *Spider-Man* games.

MICROSOFT UPDATING COMPONENTS IN REPAIRED 360 CONSOLES?

VARIOUS REPORTS ACROSS THE Internet suggest that Microsoft is taking steps to improve the cooling system in the Xbox 360. Several consoles sent in by European customers to Microsoft for repairs after the "Red Ring of Death" appeared, claim that their consoles were returned with a new second heatsink installed to prevent overheating from damaging the consoles further.

There is much speculation suggesting that the decision by Microsoft to install a second heat-sink near the 360's Xenos GPU could be seen as an acknowledgement that the 360 does have a problem with heat. Since its launch, Microsoft has constantly denied allegations that its console suffers from an inherent design flaw that could cause it to overheat and display the "Red Ring of Death".

Microsoft is declining to comment directly on the rumours, but have issued the following statement: "Regularly updating console components is commonplace within the industry and is a standard aspect of the business for a variety of reasons including cost reduction, improved manufacturability and improved performance. We do not provide details on these updates."

Wii **Sports**

CONSOLE WATCH

STEP RIGHT UP AND get an edumacation. The Wii retains its positive health spin this month, as the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital in the US stated that it is using the diminutive console to help treat patients who suffer from problems with movement and balance. Albery Liaw (34) suffered a stroke from a blow to the head in a boxing match, which left him wheelchair bound and unable to move his left arm. Through using the Wii, he's getting better and now can stand and play *Wii Boxing* and other *Wii Sports* games.

Nintendo of America marketing chief, George Harrison, predicts that 35 million units will be sold in the US by 2011. He also took a quick sassy shot at the PS3 and the 360, saying that they aren't "motivating the market."

In the opposite corner, Microsoft's Peter Moore did some return fire at the PS3 in a recent interview, and, in no few words, compared the PS3 to the SEGA swan song, the Dreamcast. Moore seems adamant that what Sony is offering just isn't "what the people want."

Sony Computer Entertainment Europe CEO, David Reeves, didn't have anything to say about the 360 or the Wii, and instead firmly denied that Sony is working on a "PSP Phone." "I haven't heard anything about it at all - and I would know. They wouldn't develop it without our knowledge." The PSP Phone rumours came about through a recently-unearthed patent that points towards Sony Ericsson possibly working on a gaming-centric phone, complete with a PSP-like screen that can swivel for portrait and landscape displays.

Oddly enough, SCEE and BT have signed a deal that lets you make video calls, voice calls and send text messages via the Internet using your PSP. Only in the UK for now.

Work in progress [blog.us.playstation.com] now lets Sony PR have their say, and will focus solely on the voice of SCEA and getting appropriate PlayStation news out to the people "who matter most, the gamers". Basically, Sony finally has its own answer to Microsoft's Major Nelson [www.majornelson.com] and his happy Xbox 360 corporate blogging.

Lions Gate Entertainment has announced that video on demand services such as Xbox LIVE's Video Marketplace has helped increase its digital revenues by 50%. The company stated that the XBL service had seen over 150,000 download rentals of 15 films. Company CEO, Jon Feltheimer, said overall video on demand sales of its *Employee of the Month* film "exceeded $3 million on a film that grossed about $27 million at the domestic box office."

Hackers have successfully hacked older PS3 firmware, and can now boot copied games. Firmware versions 1.10 and 1.11 have been fully circumnavigated according to reports, although homebrew is still a way off according to the groups.

A representative from the International Game Developers Association in Japan has told *Los Angeles Times* that many developers are shifting their focus to the Wii from the PS3. Sony retains its faith, however, and SCEA CEO, Jack Tretton, stated that the PS3 "will really take off in 2008."

LIONS GATE ENTERTAINMENT

Look & Listen
DVD • CD • GAMES — MP3 • ACCESSORIES

GAMING CHARTS

PLAYSTATION 3

1	Spider-Man 3
2	Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End
3	The Godfather
4	Formula One Championship Edition
5	MotorStorm

XBOX 360

1	Forza Motorsport 2
2	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
3	Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End
4	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
5	Crackdown

PLAYSTATION 2

1	God of War II
2	Tomb Raider: Anniversary
3	Final Fantasy XII
4	Ghost Rider
5	Medal of Honor: Vanguard

PC

1	S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl
2	The Lord of the Rings Online
3	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
4	The Sims 2 H&M Fashion Stuff
5	Tomb Raider: Anniversary

PSP

1	Call of Duty: Roads to Victory
2	SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs: Fireteam Bravo 2
3	Ghost Rider
4	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
5	Driver 76

CAPTION OF THE MONTH

Every month we'll choose a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to ed@nag.co.za with the subject [July Caption].

JULY CONTEST
NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT:
"Wait! Here's the problem! You really ought to make a point of chewing 20 times before you swallow."

JUNE WINNER
"Though it was a touch unwieldy and ran a bit hot, Steve was really chuffed with his new leaf blower."

Chris Moolenschot

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon. (6) Don't tell me what I can't do!

vivendi GAMES

WE NEED A HERO

Every month, in honour of our new favourite TV show, *Heroes*, we'll hide the mysterious mark of the heroes somewhere in the magazine. It could be in a screenshot, on a piece of hardware or anywhere, really. Find it and send an e-mail to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line [Heroes July]. We'll announce a random winner next month and that person will win a fabulous prize from our new sponsor, Trust! See details at the top of the page. And remember: Save the cheerleader, save the world!

LAST MONTH'S WINNER

Michael Garvie, p. 70

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

CALENDAR

JUNE RELEASE LIST
Subject to change

DAY	GAME	PLATFORM
1	Crash Triple Pack	PS2
2	International Cricket Captain	Multi
6	Transformers: The Game *Order now for only R257.36!*	Multi
6	Project Sylpheed	360
6	Overlord *Order now for only R499.95. Save R100!*	360
6	Ninja Gaiden Sigma *Order now for only R517.46. Save R82!*	PS3
6	Hitman Blood Money Special Edition	PC
6	Hitman Triple Pack	Multi
6	Alpha Teens on Machines	PS2
6	WWF Safari	PS2
6	Wacky Races	PS2
6	Thunderbirds	PS2
13	Saints Row (Xbox 360 Classics)	360
13	Vampire Rain *Order for only R420.26. Save R80!*	360
13	WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2007 (Xbox 360 Classics)	360
27	Eragon	PS2
27	Scarface	PS2
27	Legend of Spyro	PS2
29	Flatout	PSP
31	Rugby 2008 *Pre-order for only R259.95 and stand a chance to win a signed Springbok jersey!*	PC
31	Rugby 2008 *Pre-order for only R349.95 and stand a chance to win a signed Springbok jersey!*	PS2
TBA	SingStar Next Generation	PS3
TBA	The Darkness	PS3
TBA	Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	Multi
TBA	Armored Core 4	PS3
TBA	ATV Offroad Fury 4	Multi
TBA	Manhunt 2	Multi
TBA	Xyanide Resurrection	Multi
TBA	Impossible Mission	Multi
TBA	Atlier Iris 3	PS2
TBA	The History Channel	PS2
TBA	Ape Escape 2	PSP
TBA	PaRappa the Rapper	PSP
TBA	SOCOM Fireteam Bravo 2 (With Headset)	PSP
TBA	Guilty Gear Judgement	PSP
TBA	Worms Open Warfare 2	PSP
TBA	Hot Brain	PSP
TBA	Xiaolin Showdown	PSP
TBA	Brian Lara International Cricket	PSP
TBA	The History Channel	PSP
TBA	The Cube	PSP
TBA	Gangs of London	PSP
TBA	Lemmings	PSP
TBA	Sid Meier's Civilization IV : Beyond the Sword	PC
TBA	Yu Gi Oh Online Duel Evolution: Duel Pass	PC
TBA	Overlord	PC
TBA	The History Channel	PC
TBA	Hour of Victory	360
TBA	Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers	DS

3

HISTORY:
1971: Doors' singer, Jim Morrison found dead:
The lead singer of American rock group, The Doors, dies of heart failure in Paris at the tender age of 27.

6

EVENT:
Carnage.LAN *Cape Town*
(www.langames.co.za)

EVENT:
MPLD *Pretoria*
(www.langames.co.za)

EVENT:
SoYouWanna L337 LAN VII *Durban*
(www.langames.co.za)

7/8

EVENT:
LNR Gamers *Cape Town*
(www.langames.co.za)

9

HISTORY:
1982: Queen fends off bedroom intruder:
A man broke into Buckingham Palace and spent ten minutes chatting to the Queen in her bedroom.

10

13

14/15

EVENT:
CAL Season 1 *Rustenburg*
(www.langames.co.za)

EVENT:
Liberty *Benoni*
(www.langames.co.za)

16

17

HISTORY:
1976: African countries boycott Olympics:
25 African countries withdrew from the 21st Olympic games in Montreal.

18

19

NAG FUN FACT
In America, games are totally free, the streets are paved with burgers and everyone is always happy all the time because they're just so damn awesome. But the luxury tax really sucks.

20

EVENT:
Organised Chaos *Cape Town*
(www.langames.co.za)

21/22

EVENT:
Mayhem Comp *No Venue Specified*
(www.langames.co.za)

HISTORY:
1969: HOLY CRAP! MAN LANDS ON THE FRIKKIN MOON!: NEIL ARMSTRONG ACTUALLY WALKED ON THE MOON! OMG!

23

TRANSFORMERS THE GAME

27

EVENT:
L.A.N.ing SuX *Pretoria*
(www.langames.co.za)

28/29
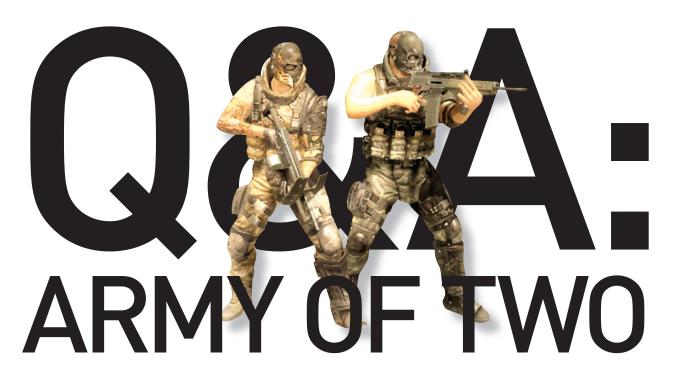
HISTORY:
1981: Charles and Diana tie the knot:
Thousands came to see out Prince Charles and Lady Diana on their wedding day.

Q&A:
ARMY OF TWO

Electronic Arts is making an earnest push to create more original games for its line-up. Leading the charge is the team-based *Army of Two*, following the exploits of two mercenaries doing jobs for a private military company. We chatted to the game's Senior Producer, Reid Schneider, to find out more.

Apart from giving orders, the characters appear to banter a lot. How will you vary your responses to your partner? Will there be standard orders or more contextual ones?
Our focus has been to create a standard set of 'orders' that the PAI (partner AI) will respond to. You can tell him to attack, hold, position, or regroup around you. However, you will never point to a place in space and have him go there. We specifically didn't want to do that as it becomes too much about squad management. It would also seem as if the PAI doesn't have real intelligence. In our game, he is constantly assessing the situation and then making decisions from there.

What sparked the idea for a cooperative game? How long has the game been in development?
We are all huge fans of co-op-style games. In the past, games have not really focused on co-op – it has just been an added-on feature. Our goal was to move co-op from co-op as a mode to co-op as THE FOCUS of the game. This is something we haven't yet seen in the next generation.

Who is responsible for the game's script?
The game's script is being written by Corey May and Dooma Wendschuh. They are currently the writers of *Assassin's Creed* and have also written the last two *Prince of Persia* games.
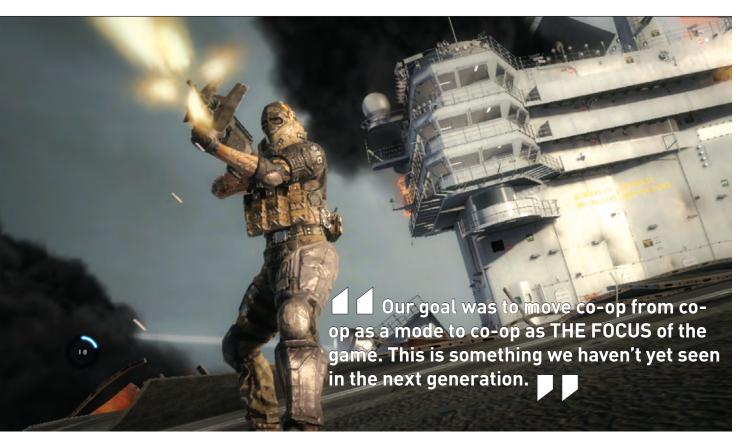
What influence has Alain Tascan as EA Montreal's head have on the game? Did the dev team play many *Splinter Cell* co-op games?
Alain is always giving us his ideas for the game and looking over what we're developing. The dev team are fans of co-op in general, and many games have done great co-op modes. However, we really wanted to focus on it as the core. A lot of us thought about the times when we played *Double Dragon* or *Contra* in co-op, and we felt this was a great inspiration for us in developing *AoT*.

The trailers suggest a deeper underlying plot than simply doing black-op jobs for cash. Will

> We look at our battlefields as 'playgrounds' where the player can make choices

❝ Our goal was to move co-op from co-op as a mode to co-op as THE FOCUS of the game. This is something we haven't yet seen in the next generation. ❞

players have levels to choose from, or does the story take precedent? Would the duo go back to a base after each mission to rearm and such?
The players will have sub-objectives they can choose to accept or not. Also, the story is an integral part of *AoT*. We really want the player to experience what the world of PMCs (private military corporations) is like.
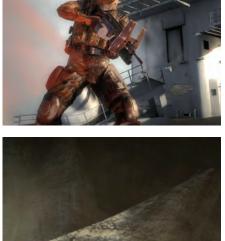
Can you tell us more about the weapon customisation? How varied can you go? Can you assemble hybrid guns, such as a shorter-range sniper handgun?
Our goal with the weapon customisation is to allow players to assemble guns to do what they want. Some players want guns with very high accuracy. Others want guns that have an additional shotgun or grenade launcher mounted on it. It's up to the player to spend money how he or she chooses in *AoT*.

Will players be able to change character armour?
Yes, players will be able to upgrade their character armour in *AoT*. They can purchase heavier armour for more protection in battle. Or, they can choose to spend their cash on more guns.

The game will feature non-linear battlefields. How much leeway is given to the two mercenaries in a level? Can you make your own way or will you be presented with more choices in the situations you encounter?

We look at our battlefields as 'playgrounds' where the player can make choices about how he or she wants to handle the encounter. There is no 'one way' to do it, but rather choice. That said, we're not developing an open world game, so there is more structure to the levels in that regard.

Can the characters latch onto each other in some way, allowing for back-to-back shooting or both taking moving cover behind a car door?
Absolutely, this is a key feature of *AoT*. We want the players to link up and perform moves like Back-to-Back or Riot Shield, etc. This is key to *AoT*.

Co-op partners can be tricky. Not only does *Army of Two* take away the safety of a controlled, scripted environment, but the team has said that it intends for drop-in co-op to be seamless, meaning the AI should at least be very capable of its job. Why do you think your PAI system will raise the bar and not just be a grand ideal?
We have been thinking about the PAI since we began *AoT*. We wanted to create a PAI that had emotions and would have a memory of what you're doing well or poorly. We have some really talented AI programmers who have been doing a great job of this.

Co-op will be supported over LIVE. However, what about system link or split-screen?
We will support split-screen as well. Probably not system link.   **NAG**

MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS
by Miktar Dracon

WII ENJOY PLAYING

OKAY, SO I HAVE a Wii. The means by which I acquired one involved a quick trip to New York to the Nintendo World Store where, despite countrywide shortages throughout the rest of the US, there were plenty of units for people to snatch up – which is exactly what people did. The instant the store was open, a line had already formed at the teller where bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Nintendo store clerks were handing them out, taking money and making actual useful suggestions on what additional purchases to make with the Wii. I grabbed a Wii, two Classic Controllers, a points card worth 2,000, an extra Wiimote and Nunchuk (since the Wii only comes with one Wiimote and Nunchuk) and in the games department I opted for *Excite Truck*, the new *Zelda* and *Super Paper Mario*. Once the store clerk saw the extra Wiimote, she suggested that I swap it for the WiiPlay bundle, which is basically a Wiimote with a specific free game that contains a bunch of fun Wiimote-centric mini games for two people to play against each other, at no extra charge. How helpful! I was impressed with the genuine warmness with which the staff treated customers, and looking around, I could see I wasn't the only one. Sure, call me a Nintendo fanboy, but when you shop at the Nintendo World Store, being called a fanboy seems worth it.

So, I left the store, clutching my rather large parcel to my chest and gave everyone on the subway home who so much as looked at my 'Precious' the Evil Eye. I was ready to cane anyone who so much as looked at my Wii with envious eyes (and ironically enough, quite a few people did).

It took a few flights to another State before I could actually unpack the Wii, and I had to endure almost endless questions by airport scanner security attendants who, once I had taken the Wii box out of my carry-on to pass through the scanner, wanted to know everything about it: Is it worth it; Is it fun. On the first leg out, I had no answers for them other than what I had heard from those I knew who had one.

Once at my destination, I quickly unpacked and set to work 'reviewing' the Wii.

Strike me down! If it isn't just the most adorable damn console ever created. And I thought the GameCube was cute! The Wii just oozes adorableness out of every inch of its white-gloss surface. Even the Wiimote gave me a happy chirp once the batteries were in and I pressed a button on it. The Wiimote is actually a bit smaller than I thought it would be, but sits quite comfortably in my hand. The Wii menu itself, looking like a series of 'channels' as if you're watching TV, is slick, smooth and utterly polished. Nothing is ambiguous and it's the exact opposite of hard to do just about anything. Digging a little deeper, I found quite a few things I liked.

The Wii comes with an internal 512MB of memory, so no need to buy a memory card! It can take a standard SD card for extra space or to view and transfer photos from it. The Wiimote itself actually has internal memory, specifically for putting your Mii on once you've created your humorous, bigheaded alter ego. This lets you take your Mii over to a friend's place by just loading it onto your Wiimote and taking it with you. That's just plain awesome, I'm sorry.

Flipping open the top panel on the Wii revealed four GameCube controller ports and slots for the GameCube Memory Card. The Wii can play all your GameCube games and you don't even need to fuss with a new controller – just plug in your original GC controllers and you're good to go. Considering there's quite a library of GameCube titles I've yet to play, personally I find this convenience rather, well, convenient. No messing with backwards compatibility either. We all know the Wii is just a spruced-up GameCube, but hey, I think that's just fine. The GC has a lot of power left, and loading up the new *Zelda* made that rather clear.

As for the Wiimote itself, the bundled *Wii Sports*, which comes with the Wii, quickly enlightened me to what Nintendo is going for. *Wii Sports*, as a collection of sports titles that uses the Wiimote gyro-sensing voodoo, really gets you into the game – baseball especially since it represents the best 1:1 translation between what the Wiimote is doing and the virtual baseball bat on screen. However you move the Wiimote in the real world is perfectly translated to the bat. Enough so that I missed most of the first balls thrown at me, just like in real life when I tried baseball and realised I couldn't hit anything worth a damn.

While there may not be a lot going on under the hood of the Wii – by no means can it compete with the visual fidelity of the 360 or the PS3 - somehow that just doesn't seem to matter. One feature in particular caught my eye and I just had to smile: everyday, the Wii generates a little report of what games were played and for how long. If the Parental Controls are active, no errant child can delete this revealing report, and I'm sure more than one parent will be using this feature to great effect (and much to the dismay of their children). **NAG**

ASUS EAH2900XT
Real-Time Overclocking with ASUS GamerOSD

Game on with the new ASUS EAH2900XT/G/HTVDI/512M! This cutting-edge graphics card utilizes the latest generation AMD GPU to provide gamers with the power of DirectX®10 special effects and an excellent audio/video experience through HDMI support enabled by Avivo™ HD technology. It also comes released with 4 specially bundled top-notch game titles – S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadows of Chernobyl, and Valve's "The Black Box" game bundle suite: Half Life 2: Episode Two, Team Fortress 2 and Portal.

Exhilarating Game Bundle

S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadows of Chernobyl from THQ

Gamers can sate their gaming appetite with this highly-acclaimed survival horror First-Person Shooter (FPS) game from THQ. With atmospheric and immersive gameplay, this game utilizes the powerful performance of the ASUS EAH2900XT to serve up a unique gaming experience like no other.

"This cutting-edge graphics card utilizes the latest generation AMD GPU"

"The Black Box" from Valve
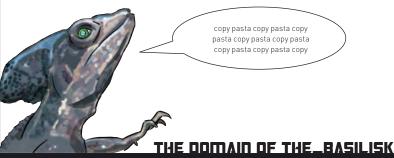
Valve's latest offerings into the gaming arena are included in their "The Black Box" bundle suite. Users will be able to use a voucher coupon to acquire free copies of 3 upcoming titles: Half Life 2: Episode Two, Team Fortress 2 and Portal from downloads through Steam – Valve's online platform for PC games when they become available later in 2007. To while away the waiting time, users will be able to enjoy a free copy of Valve's exciting Day of Defeat.

DirectX 10 and Windows Vista Ready

For those gamers who are running Windows Vista, the ASUS EAH2900XT comes equipped with full support for Windows Vista™ and DirectX® 10. The latest ATI Catalyst™ software is designed for quick setup and automatically configures the best system settings for lifelike gaming and visually stunning Windows Aero™ user interfaces.

Exclusive ASUS Features

The ASUS EAH2900XT also provides users with the exclusive ASUS Gamer OSD. This useful feature is able to deliver real-time overclocking and chat options during gameplay – allowing gamers to experience real-time performance upgrades when they need it.

THE DOMAIN OF THE BASILISK

by Anton Lines

GAMEPLAY EQUALS GAMEPLAY

YOU SHOULD ALREADY KNOW what happened on 19 May at Blizzard Entertainment's Worldwide Invitational tournament. If you call yourself a gamer, you should know. If you call yourself a serious gamer, you should be shedding tears of joy. Moreover, if you're a *StarCraft* fan, you should be shouting it from the rooftops. Myself, I'm not a religious man, but I feel like dropping to my knees and singing praises to Rob Pardo.

By the time this column goes to print, there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of *StarCraft II* previews available in gaming magazines (this one included) and all over the Internet. As such, I need not recount most of the details here. In fact, this will not be a column about *StarCraft II* at all. Rather, it will be a column about how game developers – rare as this may be – sometimes manage to get things right.

While you can never please everyone, there are a few steps you can follow in order to give yourself the best possible chance of success. Blizzard has written the manual on these steps, as it were, and why other developers refuse to learn from their stellar example remains a mystery to me. But it's even more basic than that. Every gamer knows what makes a classic – and we keep saying it, despite many developers' apparently wilful ignorance. Using some of the available information on *StarCraft II* as a guide, I will lay it all out here in black and white.

The first step is gameplay. Not graphics. Not sound. Not even story (though I personally rank this attribute highly). In order for a piece of entertainment to be a game, as opposed to a novel or a film, the primary requirement is that it be interactive – and, presumably, that we will feel compelled to keep interacting. While games that excel in the other areas may still impress us, they fail at a fundamental level. Simply put, they have chosen the wrong medium. Games cannot compete (yet) with the sound effects and visuals of *300* or *The Matrix*. They cannot compete (yet) with the stories in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* or Banks' *The Wasp Factory*. The reason for their existence is that they can do something the other mediums cannot. To forget this is to render a game obsolete practically by default.

StarCraft II started out on the right foot because the development team actively prioritised gameplay. It astonishes me that some critics have actually rebuked them for this. Blizzard has been working on this game since 2003, they say, and they've only just managed to get the Protoss, Terran and Zerg races to the playable stage. 'Only'? Only? That, as the Blizzard development team all-too-keenly know, is 90% of the entire process.

We know *StarCraft II* will probably be good because we know Blizzard understands what's important. Sure, they could still fail, despite their best efforts – but they have a far better shot at success than their rivals, most of whom waste years of the development process tweaking the graphics engine.

This brings me to the second step. *StarCraft II*'s graphics have come under some fire from (predominantly) new-school gaming journalists. Among other things, Blizzard has been criticised for seeming nonchalant about Direct X 10 support. They are indeed – and with good reason. Most people are unaware that the original *StarCraft* ran in 256 colours. That's right, 256 colours in a time when virtually everything else ran high colour or true colour. The visual cost? Nothing. For its time, *StarCraft* was an astonishingly polished and beautiful game. The advantages? The game ran superbly on even low-end systems, helping it to garner its staggeringly large and loyal fan-base. *StarCraft II* looks to be adopting the same approach, and so much the better for it.

From emphasising skill difference and strategy depth, to hiring professional *StarCraft* players to help balance the three races, to going out of their way to make the game fun to play before anything else, Blizzard is doing everything right. We know *StarCraft II* will be an instant classic - that much is obvious. However, wouldn't the world just be a happier place if other developers adopted the same mantra? **NAG**

DAMMIT
by Megan Hughes

THE GREEN-EYED GOBLIN

FINALLY, THERE IT WAS. I was holding it on my lap to prevent it sliding around (and risking any possible damage) as the car sped along (just below the speed limit, that is, especially now that, after this deduction in available funds, paying sky-high speeding fines was out of the question) homeward bound. Reflecting sunlight off the box's shiny exterior, it sat on my lap in all its green glory: a brand new Xbox 360. It may have only been a core version (i.e. minus a hard drive), but it was part of the third-generation consoles. It now appeared that I had joined the elite few who owned such beasts. It now also seemed that I was backing the Xbox, and thus Microsoft, in the ongoing and increasingly intense console wars.

I hadn't imagined it would be so heavy. I guess I never thought that I would ever be sitting with a huge green box containing a brand-new console on my lap, and so I hadn't given much thought to what its weight might be. However, packaging (presumably useless), manuals (never having been and never to be read), and the standard wired controller probably added to the weight anyway, so I still had no idea how much the Xbox 360 itself might weigh. The guy who it was bought from didn't seem to have too much of a problem lifting it up to show off its various bits and pieces, so it could hardly be that much.

Near my feet, in the now crowded passenger side of the little silver bakkie, was another large package filled with goodies: three more controllers (two wireless and one wired), which brought the total count of controllers, including the standard-issue one, up to four; a white gadget that supposedly recharged the wireless controllers while you played; a memory card for saving save points in the games; a fighting game (not exactly my taste, but it came as part of a bundle deal, so no complaining on my side!); and a logo'd bag to put it all in once everything had been removed from the plastic wrapping. What more could a girl ask for?

To keep it, I guess! Although pretty to look at and fun to hold, it was never going to see the light of day anywhere near where I lived. It may have been the only console to get that close, but it was coming no closer than the parking lot. I wasn't complaining though, since I knew that the person who would be receiving it soon would definitely use it more than I would have. He also has a household of willing team members or contenders to play with (hence the number of controllers) who will probably all enjoy the fighting game more anyway.

To be honest, though, despite the fact that it was tempting while it sat on my lap without me having to say goodbye to any hard-earned (or otherwise) money, I didn't actually want to keep it. Sure, I'd hardly have said no if someone just handed it to me and said, "keep it," but I'm in no rush to become a console owner. I have nothing against them in particular, except maybe that I'm a little incapable when it comes to wiggly bits and buttons on the controllers (making any character that I'm supposed to be controlling looking a touch inebriated), and the newer ones (as well as their games) are seriously out of my price range. I have no idea which is better or who will win 'the console wars', although, after looking around at the prices, my money would be on the Xbox 360.

I do, however, see their definite attraction. Sleek and shining, each one capable of incredible outputs (both on the screen and through the actual controllers) and producing excitement and anticipation, increasing heart rates everywhere by just oozing with power and status. Each of the latest generation consoles has proven this attraction worldwide with people queuing for days just to become their owners. My only real problem with this is that particular 'high': the 'rush' one gets from these machines just by their appearance or by playing games on them is as addictive as the highs that drugs produce. And, as with their chemical counterpart, soon you'll want more than you have. And getting more, more excitement and exhilaration become increasingly expensive. The question remains: "How high can you go?" **NAG**

RAMJET
by Walt Pretorius

BLIZZARD = CRAFTY

A LOT HAS BEEN SAID about *StarCraft II* lately. Yes, it's exciting. Yes, it's going to be cool. We know. Thanks.

An almost equal amount of chatter has gone into how Blizzard managed to keep the whole thing quiet for the last three years, and this is a far more interesting debate. The fact that they managed to keep some of the biggest gaming news of the decade concealed for what is, in gaming terms, a hell of a long time is nothing short of miraculous. And, in the end, it shows a stroke of genius too.

However, the most interesting discussion – at least for us old buggers who are far too jaded for their own good – is WHY they kept the whole thing so hush-hush for such a long time. There are a number of theories as to why Blizzard decided against getting the hype rolling early, but I like mine best. It is, after all, mine, and I am always right in my little world (population one).

It's a result, I believe, of the events surrounding the release of *Diablo II*. Now, that's going back a few years, sure, but the "once bitten, twice shy" principle is quite pervasive in this old world of ours, and I'm pretty sure that Blizzard hasn't forgotten what happened when that particular 'essential sequel' hit the shelves.

Basically, it went down like this: The hype machine got into top gear and everyone got really excited about the fantastic features that the game would offer. Then it was released and millions of gamers around the globe rushed out and bought it. As they all installed it, the universe itself held its breath. Then the millions of gamers started it up and responded with a massive cry of "double-yoo tee eff." The universe said "damn it" and went off to make itself a cup of tea. A nice cup always makes one feel better, after all.

Diablo II missed the mark in a very big way. Unfortunately, many of the things that the game was supposed to include just weren't there. And so, the disappointment factor was, as is often the case with major releases, extremely high. Maybe the fact that Blizzard released a huge, pre-emptive patch just before the release of the game should have been a clue. Still, it's easy to buy into hype, and gamers seem to be very gullible when it comes to that sort of thing. Hell, there are still people out there who think *Duke Nukem Forever* will actually be released one day. It probably will, but those looking forward to it today more than likely won't be able to afford it on their pensions when it arrives.

Back to Blizzard. These guys obviously had some kind of powwow and decided that the existence of *StarCraft II* would be enough hype all on its own. And why shouldn't it be? Ever since the end of the *Broodwars* expansion, everyone has been wondering what would happen – an open-ended story implies a follow up, after all. The announcement that the game was on its way was enough to get gamers around the globe very excited.

The advantage that Blizzard is playing is that their game should get just the right amount of hype, and hype about relevant things: things that are actually in the game. They are making sure that they deliver exactly what is promised by promising things that are already working in the game. It's genius, really, because the level of disappointment will be far lower than with other games, which receive more hype than they deserve.
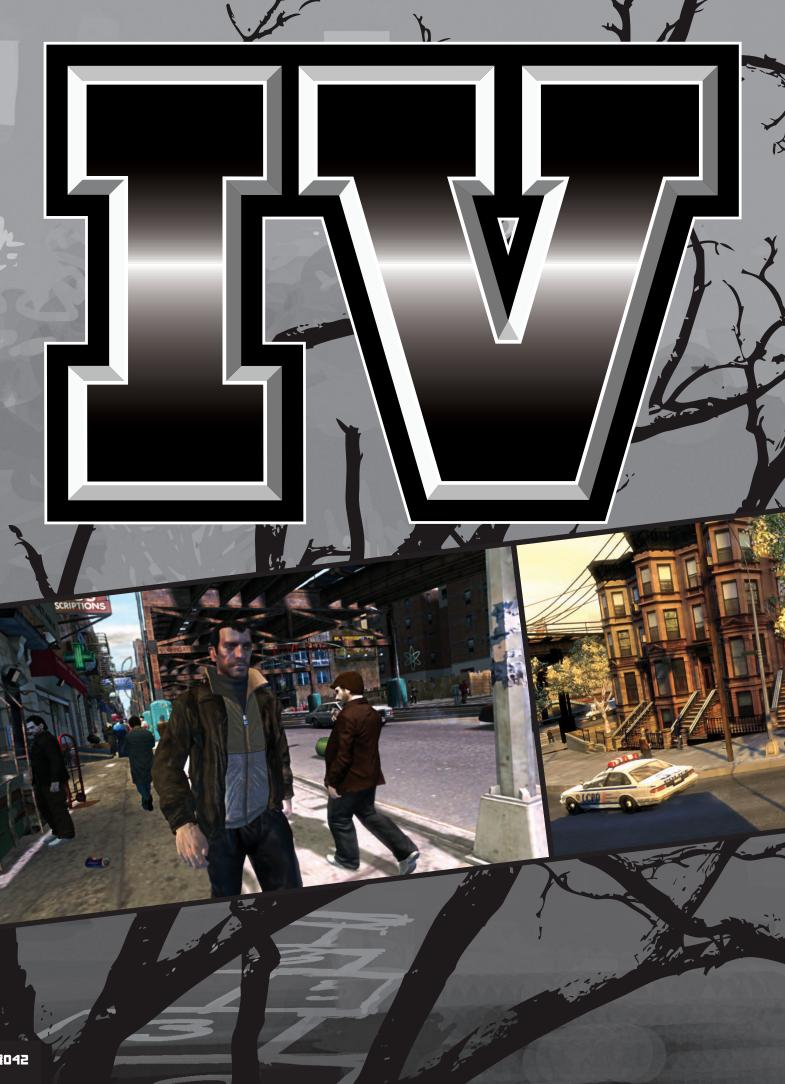
It looks like the Universe is going to have to miss out on a tea break when this one hits the shelves. **NAG**

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE-

GTA GETS SERIOUS

IT'S A BRAVE NEW world for Nico Bellic as he observes his cousin's run-down taxi business. The bastard lied to him, making up all kinds of extravagant stories detailing his wealth and success in America. Bellic hopped a few rides from his homeland from somewhere in Eastern Europe and got to the land of milk and honey, only to discover his relative in a dump, in debt and in serious trouble. However, our main man himself isn't exactly clean: he's left some unfinished business back home and he's hoping that it won't follow him.

Fat chance of that happening, buddy. You're in *GTA* country now, the hard and imposing city of Liberty City. It's always been rather interesting how the original *GTA*'s main city became its stalwart location. Not that fans really cared. To date, the most popular location seems to be the hedonistic, glitzy town that was called Vice City, while *San Andreas*'s vast cities and vaster open spaces (complete with large and forbidding hills that just begged to have bikes ramped off them) made a lasting impact as well. Nevertheless, when all's said and done, all roads in *GTA* lead to Liberty City, and so we are back in town, eager to get on with some criminal enterprise.

That's always been the point of *GTA*, hasn't it? Despite the most ardent arguments from fans about how much more there is to the series, the chance to act like a criminal is a big part of *GTA*'s allure. It's the forbidden fruit: if you had to go steal a car or mug a pimp in real life, you'd find yourself in a prison cell or emergency room in no time. *GTA*'s almost absent-minded ease of law-breaking gives people a chance to indulge in a rather naughty fantasy – one that clearly at least 16 million gamers want every time a new *GTA* is released.

However, after a while. you tire of the senseless hit-and-runs, the random hijackings and the spontaneous hostage situations in pizza joints. More substance was required, and this is where *GTA* excels and nearly every other sandbox game has failed. In *Saint's Row*, all you did was crime with no other recreational activities - not even soft core or a mildly amusing sex mini game. In *The Godfather*, you really didn't have anything other to do than family business. In *Just Cause*, you barely ventured outside of the revolution. All these games had great ideas and made important contributions to the genre. However, *GTA* always took it further. You could gamble, buy property, sniff out sub-missions, cruise around in taxis giving lifts to travellers, or chase down criminals in Vigilante mode. A very underreported aspect of *GTA* is that you received a cash bonus if you stopped a suspect being chased by a cop. There's an uncanny level of depth in *GTA*, which many people appreciate - hence its popularity.

That, of course, also translates into a lot of pressure for Rockstar. While the studio has expanded into other projects, such as *Midnight Club*, *Bully* and *Table Tennis*, its bread is buttered, spread with jam and toasted by *GTA*, along with a nice side of eggs and bacon. An incredible amount of hype has formed around the fourth *GTA* game, technically the ninth in the series. However, Rockstar's secret weapon is that the core team, which was responsible for *GTA III*, is still in charge and has a lot of ideas that could only come with the gradual insight you get from working on one series for a long time. Often, having the same people create more games for a popular IP can be a disaster. *Tomb Raider* is a good example of that. Nevertheless, Rockstar's people are clearly still very focused and eager to improve *GTA* in many ways.

So how does one go about doing that? The

WELCOME TO LIBERTY CITY

The intimidating metropolis, Liberty City, returns for a fifth time, but like you've never seen it before. Even though the game area will be smaller than what we got used to in *San Andreas*, Rockstar has stressed that it's all about density. Whereas *San Andreas* has big areas occupied by dust and huge hills, every square inch of *GTA IV* will be an urban jungle – a living, breathing one, since the developer says there will be no so-called 'dead zones'.

Thanks to the main development team being based in the city, New York allowed them to really explore and integrate the city, leading Rockstar to explain that the city is a proper location as you might see in a movie and works independently from the game itself. In Liberty City, you'll encounter several New York landmarks in new guises. The Statue of Liberty is the Statue of Happiness, DUMBO (a major overpass in the city) is now BOABO, the Metalife Building was renamed to Getalife and so on. Five of New York's six boroughs will be in the game: Algonquin (Manhattan), Dukes (Queens), Bohan (Bronx), Alderney (New Jersey) and Broker (Brooklyn). Each will have its own characteristic look, feel and population, but despite the variation, Rockstar promises that once the game has loaded, it will not need to load again. Observant readers might note that Stanton Island is missing, but the designers felt they didn't need to expand to the island area as well.

NICO BELLIC

Bellic is one shady cat, but you need to be if you want a lead in a *GTA* game. While the recent *GTA* storyline focused on characters who returned to a place they left, Bellic's visit to Liberty City is his first. In the first trailer, Bellic mutters that he has killed, enslaved and sold people, obviously referring to human slavery of some sort. If you consider the stories of past *GTA* leads, this is a significantly more sobering situation: playing the role of a former human trafficker will raise some interesting questions. Bellic hails from an unspecified Eastern European country and also marks a cultural departure for crime stories in general. It's rare to see any Western crime-driven saga, be it a movie, television show or game, with an Eastern European as the lead. A large amount of focus is on making players bond with Bellic and his problems, especially since the game will likely feature multiple paths and endings. Unfortunately, if you were looking forward to *San Andreas*'s level of character customisation, that unfortunately won't feature. Rockstar explained that this was just a bit too technical at this stage and would add a lot of time to the development cycle.

BOX OUT: MUSIC!

What would a *GTA* game be without the music? Rockstar hasn't revealed any of the artists yet, but it says that it is looking at a wide range of music for the game. A new, interesting touch, though, are plans to change the music according to what you do. Say, for example, you want to hit that ramp at the end of the street at full force with a gold cart. You'll hopefully be able to decide what kind of music will play when you do this. The game also takes a feather from *Saints Row*'s cap: songs will resonate from passing vehicles or when you leave the door open. Rockstar has already announced that unreleased songs from top artists will be part of the soundtrack.

first step would be to upgrade the populace beyond mere targets that you bump off on your way to the shop. The potential for a more realistic GTA NPC crowd first surfaced when gamers figured out that the characters in *Table Tennis* might be a testing ground for the technology. The engine used there, called the Rockstar Advanced Game Engine (RAGE), is back and in full force. Liberty City's citizens are much more natural and personal than anything you've ever seen in a game before. While walking through the town, you'll actually encounter normal(ish) conversations and interactions, not to mention some typical city behaviour. People talk on cellphones, scream at each other across the street and act annoyed when you bump into them. Nico's own interaction with people and objects in the world is quite remarkable. RAGE employs some cutting-edge physics, which even calculates Nico's posture relative to his terrain. As he moves around, his weight shifts to work with the shape of the ground. This gives the main character a lot of physicality, whether he's opening a door or running flat-out down the street away from cops, leaning into corners as he turns. He can naturally bump into people as well while on his getaway sprint, which may cause him to be knocked off balance (or knock them off balance). Meanwhile, those same citizens follow a proper cycle, going to work in the morning and so on. The streets are teeming with different types of characters, from crazies and bums to rushed businesspersons and shoppers. The overall effect is that of a living, breathing population in a teeming hive of a city: people you are much less reluctant to just randomly kill - at first, at least. It's pretty obvious that once you grab a car (which you now steal by smashing the side window with your elbow) and drive over a few sidewalks, you'll probably soften to the idea that they are just digital avatars subjected to your psychotic and unstable whims. But hey, we're driving HERE! And good parking is hard to find.

At least, we're hoping so. What has been shown of *GTA IV* so far revealed a slower-moving character, and Rockstar's representatives never bothered to go into the crime aspect with the latest presentations of the game. It's clear that there will be a much larger police presence in Liberty City, which is New York today without the crime clean up of the nineties. Nevertheless, *GTA IV*'s dynamic is deeper than any previous title in the series. Nico is the master of his own destiny and as such makes many of the choices. That, for one, means that he will call people and not just hang around waiting for someone to buzz him and request a quick assassination of a spouse. In fact, he'll technically be able to make friends, allowing him to phone up certain characters and hang around with them. This contact building will open doors to new people and hopefully new jobs. Unlike other *GTA* characters, Bellic will have several paths to choose from, not all leading to the same conclusion. While Rockstar is being very coy about it, *GTA IV* appears to boast multiple endings, all depending on how you play the game.

Much still remains unknown about the game, such as what to expect for Multiplayer. Planes won't feature, but helicopters will, and Rockstar promises that the new Liberty City is like nothing you've ever seen before in a game. It all sounds great, to be honest, but once the *GTA* bug has bitten you, it's hard to look down on anything the series promises. It's not like Rockstar has failed us yet, and *GTA IV* looks exceptional. Now, all that remains is the long wait until it's released. Maybe we'll kill some time in *San Andreas...* **NAG**

GTA FAMILY TREE

Grand Theft Auto (1997) — GTA: London 1969 (1998)

Grand Theft Auto 2 (1999)

Grand Theft Auto III (2001)

Manhunt (2003) - Manhunt's location of Carcer City exists in the GTA III canon

GTA: Liberty City Stories (2005)

GTA: Vice City (2002)

GTA: San Andreas (2004)

GTA: Vice City Stories (2006)

Grand Theft Auto Advance (2004)

Grand Theft Auto IV

Jump in.

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ROOM TO GROW

EVERY YEAR, THE SOUTH African gaming industry grows rapidly. More games reach our shores, and many titles that would in previous years have remained ambiguous to the local market now actually see local representation, thanks to the various distributors upping their game and bringing in these titles. There are more LAN parties and more gaming-related events, and even the rAge expo continues to improve and expand. Even in light of just how far the local gaming industry has come over the last few years, there are still various areas where gaming could do with much-needed improvement. It's not a matter of laying down criticism when things are going so well, but rather an appeal to the industry to not rest on its much-deserved laurels. This month, we look at what we want to see happen locally concerning the gaming industry: things we feel would further edge on the already explosive growth we're seeing.

ENDWAR

Developer→ Ubisoft | **Publisher→** Ubisoft
Platforms→ 360 | **Genre→** Strategy | **Release Date→** TBA

TOM CLANCY'S RANGE OF games has done a lot to conquer more technical action genres. Now, it's turning its sights on the strategy genre with *EndWar*, another RTS that wants to find the perfect way to welcome strategy onto consoles. The latest efforts from EA have been good, but they still try to bring the PC experience to console gamers. *EndWar* wants to take full advantage of its platform, in this case the 360, by taking advantage of the microphone peripheral. Apart from multiplayer being a persistent online war, players will apparently be able to direct troops using voice commands. Ambitious? You bet, especially when you consider all the accents the game will need to understand. This feature hasn't been demonstrated yet, but there's consolation in the fact that the project is headed by Michael de Platter, an up-and-coming developer who has the *Total War* games on his CV. So far, it all sounds nice, but it's too early to see if *EndWar* will really be the breakthrough it hopes to be.

GROTESQUE - HUNTED HEROES

Developer→ Silent Dreams | **Publisher→** TBA
Platforms→ PC | **Genre→** RPG | **Release Date→** TBA

A GUY PLAYING AN RPG game on his PC, manages to get the good and evil forces in it to destroy each other. Then he's suddenly yanked into a fantasy world, where he concludes that he is the chosen one and destined to save whatever world he found himself in. This is the start of *Grotesque*, a new tongue-in-cheek (or, as the developers like to call it, ironic) RPG that plans to make fun of conventions while also adding some flavour to the genre. Being developed by German studio, Silent Dreams, this PC-bound game will also have elements of adventure games, such as the ability to investigate items in the world for clues, riddles or just a laugh. If you respond that there was plenty of stuff to gawk at in *Oblivion*, the developers would be happy, since the game has apparently been compared to Bethesda's game. Then again, almost every new RPG now claims it. Regardless, it sounds interesting.

MYSIMS

Developer→ EA | **Publisher→** EA | **Platforms→** Wii
Genre→ Management | **Release Date→** Q3 2007

ONE HAS TO PONDER how much work this idea took: take *The Sims*, make them look like a sister genus to the Wii's Mii characters, put them in a world with *Animal Crossing*-style objectives and then let people build stuff in that world. Finally, make it a Wii and DS exclusive. Yup, EA is definitely gunning for a very specific audience with this game, namely most of the Wii-using, *Sims*-playing world. In *MySims*, a player can customise a cute and funny avatar with a few flicks of the Wiimote and then embark on a quest to save a local dilapidated town. By improving the town, new people move in. When new people move in, you can build a house for them. To build stuff, you'll need essence, which you gain by scrounging around nature or building more stuff. It sounds pretty interesting, actually, and will definitely be a joy on the Wii if the idea holds.

SPEEDBALL 2: BRUTAL DELUXE

Developer→ Empire | **Publisher→** Empire
Platforms→ 360 | **Genre→** Sport | **Release Date→** August 2007

IT WOULD APPEAR THAT small but resilient publisher, Empire, has found a fertile field on LIVE Arcade. The company's *Double Dragon* update, released on the service, proved very popular and certainly was a sign of things to come. More of those things are, in fact, on their way, namely this HD update of the classic *Speedball 2*. More accurately, it's a touched-up version of the same game released on mobile phones and the GBA. Your team takes part in a fast and savage futuristic sport and have to climb to the top of the league. Being on XBLA, you can definitely expect the GBA's four-player mode to feature as well. It's not clear if this will be a cheaper or more expensive XBLA title, but if it's as quick and polished as its other versions, it's going to be popular.

HYDROPHOBIA

Developer→ Blade Interactive | **Publisher→** TBA
Platforms→ TBA | **Genre→** Action | **Release Date→** TBA

IT'S THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY of the Queen of the World, a massive luxury cruise ship, though calling it a floating city is more apt. The enormous ship is the size of a small city. The futuristic vessel is set in, ah, some point in the near future and houses the super rich. It would cost you quite a few million to secure a small pad on the ship, and billions if you want to talk something big with a view and favourable lease conditions. Naturally, this ship isn't rubbing everyone up the right way, so a bunch of terrorists, who subscribe to the ideas of a 19th century economist, decide to ram an explosive ship into it. All that sets the stage for *Hydrophobia*, a game that you clearly should avoid if you have serious issues with water. The next-gen project, possibly on the 360 and PC, apparently features some startling water effects that even put upcoming games to shame.

HAZE

"IT'S NOT A WAR-GAME. It's a game about war."
A game that makes you feel deep, connected emotions with its story? It's a lofty ambition, but one that *TimeSplitters* developer, Free Radical Design, seems hell-bent on doing. Getting across to the gamer will apparently make up a big part of *Haze*, the studio's first next-gen project. While FRD has mused about a fourth *TimeSplitters* game, right now it's focusing on this new property that is slowly impressing everyone. It has even been compared to *Crysis*, thanks to its jungle location, futuristic theme and stunning visuals. However, the studio, originally formed by four Rare employees, wants *Haze* to do so much more. It wants the game to pose questions about morality and truth to the player, all while having a kick-ass time blowing up whatever needs to be eradicated.

The game will assign you as Sergeant Shane Carpenter, a new guy at a private military corporation (PMC) called Mantel. Mantel's clients are governments and it helps restore and maintain order in a chaotic period forty years from now. Mantel also happens to have interests in a lot of things, so it's really a dominant multinational corporation. Carpenter gets shipped off to a South American country where a terrorist group called The Promised Hand overthrew the local government, and Mantel has been hired to fix the situation. *Haze*'s twelve location, fifteen-hour story takes place over three days in this war. Carpenter's helmet, which secretly filters the way he sees the environment, gets damaged and he is suddenly exposed to the harsher reality of what he's doing. Questions arise and our soldier isn't that sure anymore about who

the real enemy is. Things are complicated by NECTAR, a drug Mantel produces that gives your character some snappy abilities (see the Box out). Unfortunately, a NECTAR overdose also confuses you about who friend or foe is. Since you'll be part of a squad of four guys, you can see how that could be a problem.

All of this ties into what FRD says is a heavy story narrative. *Haze* will even employ the powerful methodology *Half-Life* pioneered – no interruption with cut-scenes and a strictly first-person point of view. The team even intends for the game to not be interrupted with menus or loading time. Immersion is an important quality of *Haze* - even the in-game characters have apparently been motion-captured via actors (my guess is... courtesy of Ubisoft's mo-cap studio). FRD has attempted this before though, with the lukewarm *Second Sight*. The game boasted a meaty story and nice narration, even more impressive than the *TimeSplitters* series, but it was trumped by the more-engaging *Psi-Ops*. With *Haze*, FRD seems intent on really bringing gameplay and story together, so much so that they hired a script writer, Rob Yescombe, to handle one aspect of it.

It's interesting to note that *Haze* seems to have undergone a style change between E3 last year and now. Yescombe's hiring late last year might be the reason, since he's been working on moulding a decent yarn around FRD's game, which in turn appears to have altered the game itself as well. In the past, FRD's productions have been scripted by internal staff members, so this presents an interesting synergy. Even though Yescombe seems to overstate the role of the story in the game somewhat, *Haze* will definitely not

just be a run-of-the-mill shooter. Missions will involve different objectives and gameplay mechanisms, including not having a weapon for certain periods. In short, *Haze* wants to be the smarter gamer's FPS. FRD is the studio that can pull that off – before *Halo* the team was almost solely responsible for making first-person shooters work well on consoles.

However, is *Haze* really doing anything different, then? Yes, the NPC squad members. Considering everything mentioned above, a team of AI characters provides a unique challenge. *Haze*'s big achievement would be if it could combine *Half-Life* with *Gears of War* or *GRAW* (minus the ability to give orders). That's a tough call, especially since the AI characters are likely to be with you all the time. This indicates the ability for three other gamers to join your single-player game, *à la Crackdown*. Even if the story integration ends up being pointless and contrived, few games have gone wrong investing in co-op.

Haze is heading to the PlayStation 3 first, with the PC and 360 versions only arriving next year. FRD is once again throwing its support behind the PlayStation family, which has been very good for the studio. That means that PS3 owners finally have something to wave around during obligatory console arguments, at least for a few months. FRD's legacy with the PlayStation would also likely render *Haze*'s PS3 version as the definitive one. Even if the whole emotion/narration deal doesn't quite work, the core game with co-op support and stunning visuals most definitely will. **NAG**

James Francis

THE TEAM

Haze's development is led by Free Radical Design co-founder, David Doak, whose CV also includes work on *Donkey Kong Country 3*, *Perfect Dark*, *GoldenEye* and all FRD's games. Derek Littlewood takes on the role of Project Lead, adding *Haze* to his list, which includes *TimeSplitters 2* and *Second Sight*. Rob Yescombe, though, is a new face who was only hired late last year. He's a professional script writer, though *Haze* is the first project that we could find him credited for.

NECTAR

Mantel's pharmaceutical division has concocted NECTAR, a drug that enhances the user's abilities. When taking a jolt, users gain Perception, which lets them spot enemies hidden in the jungle. Other benefits also include Focus, which makes one extremely accurate, and Foresight, which warns of imminent explosions nearby. Apparently, the drug plays a significant role in the story, especially when you overdose on it. If that happens, you won't be able to differentiate between friend and foe.

ADMINISTERING

Bumblebee Squad. GO!

Silent Hill braais really suck

The horror of a janitor

SILENT HILL: ORIGINS

WE ALL KNOW THAT one of the most intense horror series ever developed is the *Silent Hill* franchise, and once again, the anticipation of guiding another poor soul through those deadly, fog-ridden streets is mounting as the new title gets ready for release. *Silent Hill: Origins* for the PSP will be launched later this year and this time, the story focuses on a truck driver named Travis O'Grady.

Travis seems to be a very capable man with some combat skills, and as he progresses through the streets of Silent Hill, he will find various weapons including katanas, sledgehammers and even portable televisions. Along with these weapons come the control schemes, which appear to be highly polished for some superior gameplay on the small screen. To perform a quick attack only requires a simple tap on 'X', while a more powerful attack needs a proper push on the button. Travis may also perform finishing moves on his prey once they have fallen. This has to be done fast lest the creature gets back up. There will also be the usual guns in play, but unlike before, Travis will be a lot more accurate. Another added balance issue, which will make the game more enjoyable, is the durability rating. All weapons in the game

will only be useable for a certain period before they break, and Travis will have to either use his fists or find another weapon.

The new enhanced third-person camera system will also be quite exciting to use, as the developers have stated that it had been inspired by *Resident Evil 4*. In addition to this, all health and weapon icons have been removed. Another interesting fact (for those interested in the soundtrack) is that Akira Yamaoka has written 15 all-new tracks for this game, which should make it even more cinematic.

The other exciting aspect about *Silent Hill: Origins* is that the developers have promised that it would tie up many loose ends from the previous games. As well as being a prequel to *Silent Hill 1*, it will tie into the original with a few surprises for fans.

Silent Hill: Origins promises to bring us all the thrills and excitement from the first game, but on a completely new level. In addition to these thrills, the developers have also stated that there would be no lack in puzzles to solve. However, it's better to leave these unspoken in fear of spoilers.

If you don't have a PSP yet, you might consider buying one now because this is a definite must-have.   **NAG**

Justin Slabbert

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

"100 bucks say I can land on both their heads"

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

PICTURE IT: SICILY, 1943. Roving spotlights scrape the skies and the relentless rattle of antiaircraft artillery punctuates the night, as the Allied forces converge on the Nazi-controlled city. A squad of American paratroopers huddles in a Dakota Skytrain that drones overhead, angling for a drop zone. Boyd Travers, Private First Class, *82nd* Airborne Division, awaits the order to jump. One of his squad mates falls dead on the floor, riddled with shrapnel, as their transport behemoth is hammered with flak from resistance forces. The remaining soldiers hustle to the door panicked, and leap out into the war. It's the first regimental combat drop in history, and Operation Husky is underway. And as opening gambits go, it's awesome.

MOH: Airborne, as its title suggests, follows the adventures of the intrepid American airborne forces, from the Allied invasion of Italy, through Holland, France, and finally culminating in the triumphal Operation Varsity: the single largest airborne drop ever, where nearly 15,000 troops floated down into German territory to seize a crucial foothold over the River Rhine.

The most hotly touted feature of the game is its so-called, start-anywhere gameplay. As each mission kicks off, players are presented with a target map of the area, and given a tantalising choice of drop zones. In Sicily, for example, there are nine different landing spots, each with their own tactical advantages and disadvantages. Once your boots (or buttocks) hit something solid, objectives will appear all around you, depending on where

you are. You might like to drop down on the Town Hall roof, for example. Needless to say, such a central point is swarming with understandably enraged Axis forces, and you'll meet some formidably fierce opposition once you've managed to untangle yourself from your parachute apparatus. On the other hand, that antiaircraft cannon, causing so much grief in the skies above, is just a hop, skip, and emptied ammo cartridge away.

The game also debuts EA's ingenious new Affordance AI. Affordances are any actions that can be performed to gain a tactical advantage, especially in terms of terrain and urban infrastructure. This makes for constantly shifting battle lines, as the AI will attempt to claim and reclaim strategically favourable areas. Fighting from the relative safety of high ground and bunkers is, after all, far better than shambling about in the open streets, and the smartest thing to do when a live grenade plonks down in the dust nearby is to 'ruuuuuuun'. You know this, and now the dastardly AI does too.
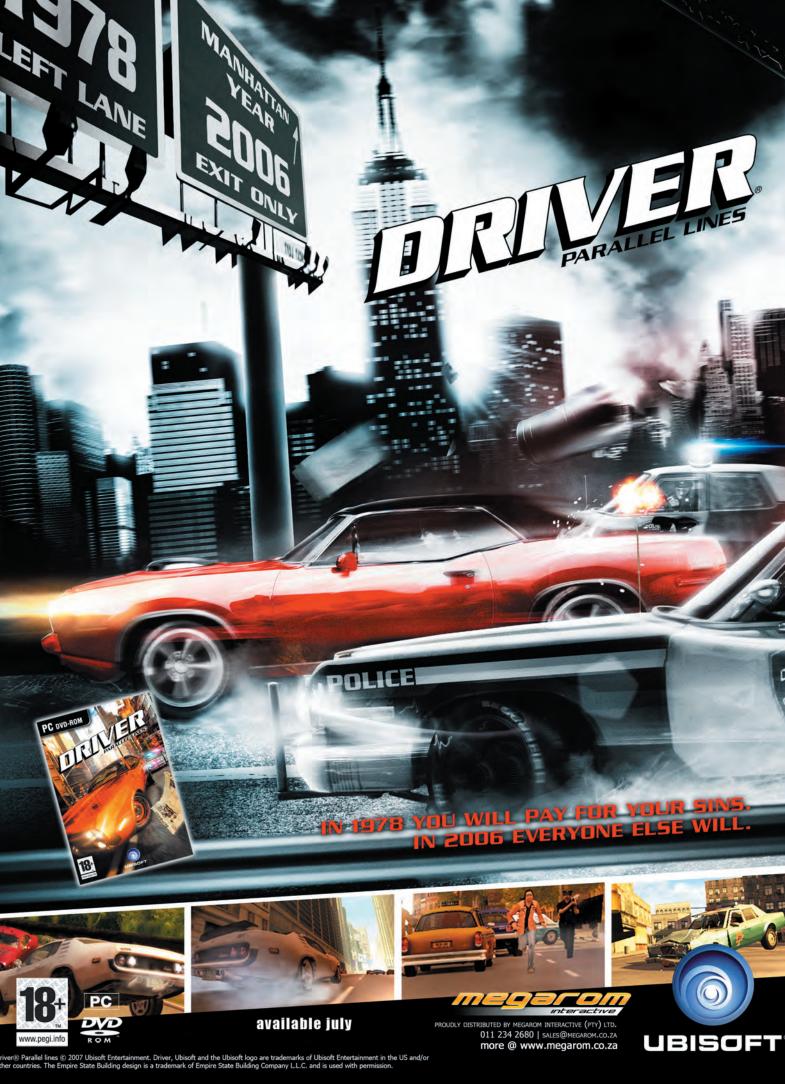
Another innovative addition (and it's been such long time coming, comrades) is a weapon upgrade and customisation system, which goes hand-in-hand with a basic RPG-like model of proficiencies. You might, for example, find a forward pistol grip or grenade launcher modification lying abandoned behind some sandbags, but if you've no idea how to use it, it'll be nothing more than a pretty bit of scrap to hang on your wall. **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl

Holy crap! You just shot Frank!

WORLD IN CONFLICT
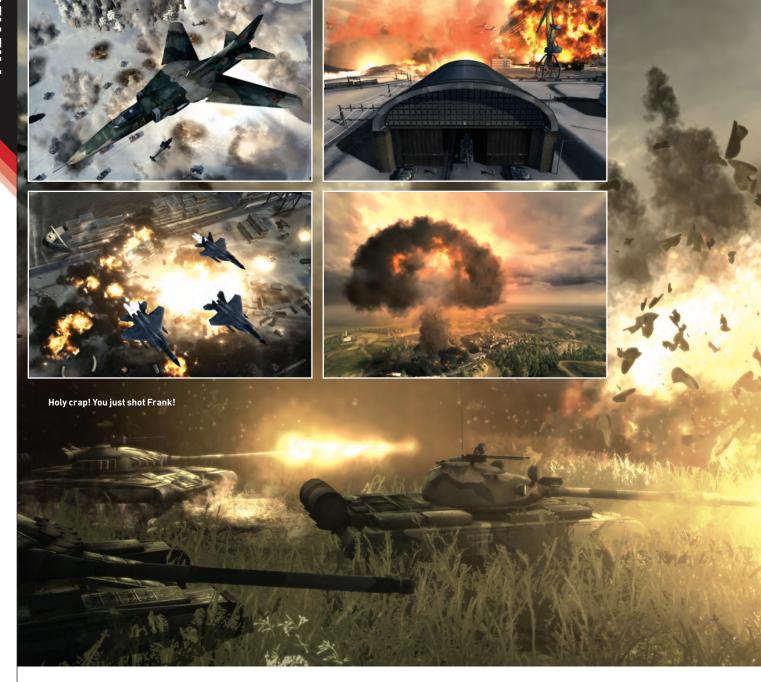
IMAGINE IF THE SOVIET Union never crumbled. What would the world be like? Would America still be the ultimate superpower? How about the Cold War. Would it have amounted in full-scale combat? Well, the developers at Massive Entertainment try to answer that with their new real-time strategy game, *World in Conflict*. The game takes place in 1989, when the Soviet Union faced an economic crisis, which in real life toppled it. However, in the game, the Soviet Union risks all-out nuclear war for the benefit of us, the gamers, and it will take place in Midwest America, the home of the brave. Fight your way through massive battlefields and unleash an arsenal of nuclear weapons upon the opposition, whether they are American or Soviet. However, remember to keep reserves in the bank, because in this game, there will be no base building or resource gathering, unlike the conventional RTS. It seems that in the gameplay sense, *World in Conflict* is

a spiritual successor to *Ground Control II*. Players will also have some other elements such as various tactical aids, which can come in at different times - some being nuclear bomb drops or even paratroopers. This resource feature might seem to some people very much like that of *Warhammer: Dark Omen* or *Mark of Chaos*, but will certainly add new dimensions of strategy to that of just trying to swarm enemies. Tactics are now essential instead of the constant monotony seen in some other RTS games.

World in Conflict will feature Massive Entertainment's very own Masstech engine and will feature some very unique multiplayer experiences. For example, a player will choose what types of units he or she will control, instead of commanding the whole battlefield if with many others on a team. One could control all the infantry while another would control the helicopters and planes and yet another all the tanks and trucks. The

game looks to be very cooperatively based in this regard and will surely add a whole new depth of realism to the RTS genre.

In addition, another interesting point is the lack of any way-out inventions like the *Command & Conquer* series, which could be quite interesting. It surely will be more realistic fighting with units that have been designed solely on real-life military equipment. There is still a chance that some different equipment might be seen, but so far, the developers have remained tight lipped on this matter.

The game has many influences that people might pick up on, some being that of Tom Clancy and others being an old movie from the 80s called *Red Dawn*, which is about a fictional invasion of America by Russia. With these influences, *World in Conflict* looks to be a good, solid title in terms of the story, and from what has been shown so far, this RTS will be one for the collector's shelf. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

Sometimes flatulence/lighter
jokes go terribly wrong

UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE

FAMED FOR THEIR CREATIONS for the Sony consoles, the Naughty Dog developing team, developers of legendary franchises *Crash Bandicoot* (for the PSone) and *Jak & Daxter* (for the PlayStation 2), are introducing themselves, quite nicely, to the PlayStation 3 in this third-person action and adventure game. Believing himself to be a descendant of the renowned explorer/pirate, Sir Francis Drake (who was thought to have had no heirs), the main character in *Uncharted*, Nathan Drake, is out to claim his inheritance. First stop - a boat off the coast of the Panama Island to search for Francis Drake's body. A 400-year-old clue found in the coffin sees Nathan, accompanied by documentary filmmaker, Elana Fisher, among others, off on a quest to find the forgotten treasure of El Dorado. Of course, nothing will go smoothly and the trip to the lost island in the Pacific is cut short when their plane is gunned down.

Hunted by mercenaries and pirates alike, Nathan and his companions work at uncovering the secrets the island holds, and find themselves travelling through the Amazonian jungle to a host of beautifully-animated locations including an abandoned Spanish colony and a pre-Inca temple. Even a decrepit U-boat forms part of the treasure hunt. To create a more absorbing game, the use of the HUD (Heads-up Display) has been kept to a minimum. This means that only the equipped weapon and ammo are visible. Health is indicated by means of screen colour and heartbeat, with the sound of his heartbeat being amplified and the screen being drained of colour as Nathan's health decreases.

A wide variety of weapons is available, but strategising is necessary as the main character has a limited carrying capacity. Shooting from the hip is also possible, though less accurate as the crosshairs are not visible. In the conflicts Nathan finds himself in (i.e. fights, which include high-speed chases, gun battles and hand-to-hand combat), his companions become crucial tools. Using cooperative mechanics, Nathan's friends become indispensable in battle as well as in exploration of the island.

However, not only the impressive storyline and team play should keep you hooked. The Naughty Dog team has made use of the PS3's proprietary technology to create a lifelike and seemingly seamless game. Nathan Drake alone brags an impressive 3,000 animations, while all characters are given lifelike expressions using the Wrinkle Mapping Facial Animation. To create a realistic environment, in which Nathan can find cover or jump and climb through, a good collection of next-generation rendering techniques were used. Bump and Parallax Mapping, Blend Shaders, Global Illumination, Run Time and Real Time Shading all add up to host of beautiful locations and impressive animations. Wave Simulation (as well as Refraction and Reflection techniques) is used to make the water as real as possible, while floating-point colour calculations mean high-definition lighting. Normally, all this would mean long loading periods, but once *Uncharted* has started, there is no loading, with everything streamed directly from the Blu-ray Disc. **NAG**
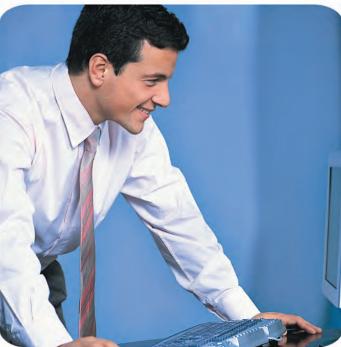
Megan Hughes

Crocassphobia: the fear that a crocodile
will leap out and bite your butt

EYE OF JUDGEMENT

Developer→ SCEI | **Publisher→** SCEA | **Genre→** Action | **Release→** Q4 2007

NOW HERE'S A GENUINELY intriguing little number. While its predecessor was relegated to a number of somewhat lacklustre and obscure titles, Sony has now found a remarkably innovative application for the PlayStation Eye (aka EyeToy 2). Teaming up with Wizards of the Coast, the company is developing a card-battle game like no other that has come before.

Eye of Judgement ships with the game disc, a deck of cards, a 3 x 3 battle grid, a special stand for the Eye, as well as the all-seeing Eye itself as an optional extra. When setting up the game, the Eye is positioned over the grid, onto which players place their cards. Using some sort of marvellous devilry,

the Eye is able to read and identify the cards played, and this is where things go all shades of awesome.

As soon as a card is put into play, its 3D virtual doppelganger springs to roaring life on an on-screen battle grid. Razzle-dazzle! The aim of the game is to jostle for control of five squares on the grid, by trotting out a strategically-selected legion of ogres, dragons, and other generic fantasy beasties, all with their own arsenal of spells, abilities, and the like. The on-screen grid itself features a randomly-spawned array of environment types, while each creature is associated with a particular element: water, fire, stone, forest, or a mechanical element called "biolith." Playing a

flame-swathed balrog out onto the undulating waves of a river, for example, will clobber its hit points – a manoeuvre that could potentially send your prized troll off to a lonely and watery grave. Once your agents of cataclysm engage with the enemy, they're whisked off the grid and into a range of virtual locations - from crumbling ruins to gloomy woods and swamps - to hack at each other in an extravagant display of lighting and particle effects.

The game is slated for a fourth-quarter release, but check out the gameplay videos in the meantime. Even if this isn't really your fancy, it's worth a gawk simply for the sake of novelty.   **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl

You seem to be choking on something. Let me help you.

I AM SAM. Want to make a joke about that?

SPLINTER CELL CONVICTION

Developer→ Ubisoft Montreal | **Publisher→** Ubisoft | **Genre→** Stealth | **Release→** Q4 2007

DAMN IT SAM, YOU just make your own life difficult. The last time we left the world's best secret agent, he was in the messy world of *Double Agent*. Turn the clock forward a few years and we find him in the urban jungle, with no gadgets, goggles or nifty weapons in sight. In fact, his only camouflage is the rugged look he's developed since becoming a bit of a recluse. However, news of a series character landing in trouble spurs him back into action. Unfortunately, Third Echelon doesn't share Sam's view and he's forced to go rogue, which sets the company after him.

So, no gadgets and no dark areas either. *Conviction* is a complete departure from the series, instead using a new system called Active Stealth. Perhaps taking a cue (and some technology) from sister project, *Assassin's Creed*, *Conviction* will let players blend into crowds and cause all kinds of distractions to get past guards, sentry points and snoopy individuals. Drop a cellphone and call it, steal a laptop and dump it somewhere, or pretend to be part

of a group. Sam's ability to blend with groups of people will be his primary means of surviving, but the developer says innovative players will find a lot of reward in playing *Conviction*.

If things do get dicey, and you know they will, Sam uses his hand-to-hand combat abilities to stop someone, employing kicks, punches and blocks, plus perhaps a few grappling moves. All of this is intuitively controlled by Ubisoft's new physics system, which not only lets Sam grab stuff like tables, chairs, lamps and so on, but also causes damage to the environment when he throws people into stuff (or gets thrown).

In short, think Wesley Snipes in *U.S. Marshals*. Nothing is as bad-ass as a rogue agent, and while it's a dramatic departure, the new *Splinter Cell* is probably going to attract series fans and new blood alike. The new approach to stealth might even bring gamers who prefer a more hands-on time into the world of *Splinter Cell*.   **NAG**

James Francis

Another person startled by a huge pineapple

THE SIMS 2: BON VOYAGE

Developer→ Maxis | **Publisher→** EA | **Genre→** Life simulation | **Release→** Q4 2007

IN THE BEGINNING, WILL Wright created *The Sims*. And behold, for it did summarily beget many lucrative expansions, for it was – however unlikely – a smash hit. And Will Wright saw that this was good, but not good enough, for verily did it beg a graphics overhaul, a fully 3D engine, neighbourhoods, and woohooing. So he retired to his fortress and spent much time in profound contemplation, while liveried elves skittered anxiously outside his door to await their patriarch's inevitable revelation. "For he is truly the master," they whispered in the halls, "of the unlikely smash hit." And the moon did wax and wane many times o'er, and anticipation reached fever pitch. And then, one day, Will Wright burst forth, a triumphant

finger wagging at the noonday sky, and proclaimed, "A sequel! I shall create a sequel! With a graphics overhaul, a fully 3D engine, neighbourhoods, and woohooing! And other stuff!" And here he paused a while, picking his nose, before adding slyly, "But I shall leave the other stuff for the expansions. Yes, indeed. Truly am I the master of the unlikely smash hit that keeps on hitting." And the elves squealed and applauded, for they knew that failure to do so was death.

And now, ladies and gentleSims, what you've been waiting for: the vacation expansion. Send your Sims off for some R&R to three destinations: an idyllic island Shangri-la where they can rot on the beach and dig for

treasure; a woodsy camping hideaway in the mountains (hold thumbs for a serial killer); or the placid zen gardens of the Far East. Each locale offers some sort of touristy excursion, like glass bottom boat cruising out in the bay or a thrilling adventure van ride, as well as a range of accommodation options to suit your Sims' pockets. Room service? Yes, please, my Cooking skill is only '2'.

Expect the usual deluge of new clothes, items, and other stuff (a Tourism Career path, anyone? Computer says 'probably'). We imagine it could also work out rather nicely with the Seasons expansion installed, but no official word on that yet. **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl

HOSPITAL TYCOON

Developer→ Deep Red Games | **Publisher→** Codemasters | **Genre→** Management | **Release→** Q2 2007

EXPLOSIVE SNEEZING, BACKSTABBING VILLAINS, and a healthy dose of the best kind of medicine: humour. It's all in a day's work for the new Hospital Chief in *Hospital Tycoon*. Unfortunately, the hospital you are assigned to run has been somewhat neglected, owing to the fact that your predecessor favoured extracurricular activities with the nurses instead of actually fulfilling his hospital duties. These duties, which become your responsibility, are centred around disease research and treatment. Following in the footsteps of the classic *Theme Hospital*, *Hospital Tycoon* features some very unusual, and generally amusing, ailments, while the cures are equally odd, inventive and probably painful. Even the staff isn't safe from the strange medical conditions,

with Stress Zombosis often affecting the overworked. Treatment facilities, like physiotherapy and surgery rooms, once researched, need to be built and maintained to keep up with the variety of illnesses affecting the population.

Hiring and firing of staff members as well as budgeting for new machinery and furniture are all part of keeping the Hospital running smoothly and keeping the patients happy (and preferably healthy). Inspections are also carried out regularly to ensure working order is maintained. Keeping both the mental patients and the vomit out of sight should impress the inspectors, and high ratings and good scores in inspection reports mean vital cash bonuses for the hospital.

However, there is more to this hospital

than meets the medically-trained eye. Designed in a soap opera style, *Hospital Tycoon* is just as much about the staff relationships as it is about patient relations with three seasons, each with four episodes, treachery and romance are part of the prescription. Beginning with objectives designed to help get your hospital going, the game is ultimately open-ended with the fate of the patients and the staff in your hands. A sandbox mode will, apparently, also be available for those who wish to stretch their creative fingers. The title seems to have a lot of potential and the rounded graphics and bright, cheerful colours, coupled with the repetitive music and ambience, will probably appeal to Hospital strategy genre fans. **NAG**

Megan Hughes
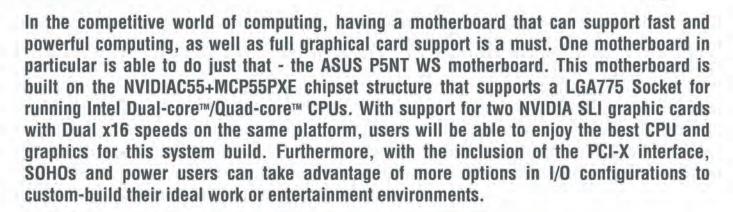
Superb Efficiency and Expandability

ASUS P5NT WS Motherboard Supports New PCI-X Structure for Faster Graphical and CPU Options

In the competitive world of computing, having a motherboard that can support fast and powerful computing, as well as full graphical card support is a must. One motherboard in particular is able to do just that - the ASUS P5NT WS motherboard. This motherboard is built on the NVIDIAC55+MCP55PXE chipset structure that supports a LGA775 Socket for running Intel Dual-core™/Quad-core™ CPUs. With support for two NVIDIA SLI graphic cards with Dual x16 speeds on the same platform, users will be able to enjoy the best CPU and graphics for this system build. Furthermore, with the inclusion of the PCI-X interface, SOHOs and power users can take advantage of more options in I/O configurations to custom-build their ideal work or entertainment environments.

Enjoy More Efficiency with PCI-X Structure

The P5NT WS motherboard is designed with a new PCI-X Structure - an updated version that is faster than the conventional PCI standard. It is also fully hardware and software backward compatible to previous generations of PCI. The new standard will prepare and keep pace with upcoming advances in high-bandwidth business-critical applications such as Fibre Channel, RAID, networking, SCSI, and iSCSI.

Exceptional Thermal Solutions

The innovative Heat-pipe Thermal design of the P5NT WS
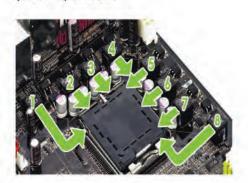
motherboard directs the heat generated by the chipsets to the heatsink at the rear IO ports - allowing fast heat dissipation via airflows from the CPU or optional fans. This groundbreaking fanless Heat-pipe Thermal design lowers temperatures without lifetime problems that a normal chipset fan has; and provides the most reliable fanless thermal solution to date.

Benefit From Cool and Quiet 8-Phase Power Design

This motherboard also includes an 8-Phase Power Design that reduces

input ripple current and output ripple voltages - effectively safeguarding CPU power modules from the risk of high-power stress. The 8-Phase Power Design also gives users the reliability and stability required under heavy loading and overclocking by stabilizing output currents and voltages. Furthermore, the ASUS P5NT WS motherboard utilizes high quality solid aluminum capacitors - in line with ASUS's standard in utilizing only the best quality materials. With all these innovations, components last longer, and operate at 20°C (36°F) lower than conventional solutions - resulting in lower fan speeds and quieter operations.

The Darkness

The Darkness is finally dawning on the gaming world, bringing along with it wicked evils and lots of violence. Fortunately you will be Jackie, the young Mafia hit-man imbued with the seemingly timeless entity. Even more fortunate, the game is based on one of the hottest and most read comics today, born from the team of prolific writer Garth Ennis and highly talented artist Marc Silvestri. But the best of all is that the game is being developed by Starbreeze, the same guys responsible for the excellent Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher's Bay. Everyone wins. Except, of course, anyone who crosses the path of Jackie and The Darkness. So here's a little bit of indulgence for fans: a look at the comic series, a chat with Silvestri himself and our impressions after playing the game.

INTO THE DARKNESS

Once you find out that The Darkness is actually based on a comic series, you'd be forgiven for turning your head and looking for something more interesting. But this is not another Marvel or DC production; instead it comes from Top Cow, the renegade studio that broke away from Image (*Spawn, Gen 13*) over a decade ago. Mature, gritty and gory, it's everything you really want in a game.

THE HIT COMIC SERIES, *The Darkness*, was created by some of the biggest names in comics (Marc Silvestri, Garth Ennis and David Wohl) and was published by Top Cow. The first volume was issued in December 1996 for a run of forty issues, which quickly picked up a large fan base with its amazing art, gripping story, and the coolest character to hit comics in years. With regular tie-ins with Top Cow's main comic series, *Witchblade,* as well as a few other crossovers with other popular characters, *The Darkness* soon became one of the more anticipated series, and it was no big surprise when Top Cow started its second series in December 2002. Since then, *The Darkness* has been released regularly, with a few miniseries runs as well as crossovers with some of the big names in comic book characters like *Superman*, from DC comics, and *Wolverine*, from Marvel.

The Darkness tells the story of Jackie Estacado, a hit man for the mafia, who discovers that he has strange and terrible powers and is able to create shapes and instruments out of some elemental dark power, and to summon demons linked to this power to wreak havoc on those around. However, these powers can only manifest in darkness. Jackie soon learns how to use and control his powers, and he quickly rises through the ranks in the 'family'. However, it's not all good times, as Jackie soon discovers that timeless forces of good now hunt him and his strange new powers. To make matters worse, his newfound powers start interfering with his love life in ways that he wishes they didn't.

Part of the popularity of *The Darkness* stems from the fact that the main character's no hero. Rather, he's a bad guy. He's a hit man - an antihero. Yes, there are times when he does the right thing, and he doesn't simply turn villain and start laying waste to the world around him. However, even at his best, Jackie Estacado is a bit of bad guy, a man of few morals, dark pleasures, and only out for himself. It's a nice change in a comic book market dominated by goody-two-shoes superheroes flying around in spandex. Another aspect that appeals to so many fans is the writing. The first series was telling a fairly serious story, but it was written in such a way that its dark humorous side clearly bared its fangs. Of course, the obvious reason most of us first stopped to pick up an issue of *The Darkness* was the breathtaking artwork. When seeing one of Marc Silvestri's covers, you'd have the book open and be reading it in an instant (and be relieved to find the same stunning art inside the comic, and not just on the cover!).

It's really no surprise that *The Darkness* found its way into videogames. This kind of story belongs in all media: comics, gaming, films, and wherever else you can find fans of extremely cool characters, dark fantasy, mafia wars, weird little demons and drop-dead sexy women.

PAUL JENKINS   ERIC BASALDUA   RON MARZ   MARK TEXEIRA   FRANK TIERI

ENTERING THE DARKNESS

JACKIE BOY! WE'RE NOT sure if we should feel sorry for you. On the one hand, your mobster uncle, not to mention a corrupt police chief and other gang outfits, are out to kill you. You are out-gunned and in deep trouble. On the other hand, you have a lot of friends who'll help you and a very cute girlfriend who lives for you and you live for her. Then there are the dark powers you suddenly gained - all of this on your twenty-first birthday. Sure, the powers are pretty incredible and very devastating, but they come with a dark presence - one that isn't inclined towards you running the show. As if a hotshot hit man's life wasn't complicated enough.

That is the initial and opening section of *The Darkness*, a game *Chronicles of Riddick* developer, Starbreeze, has been tooling at for a while now. As the game nears completion, we had the opportunity to thoroughly explore some early code, and came away from the experience feeling enlightened and slightly giddy. If you've played *Riddick*, this won't be hard to explain. Starbreeze has once again created an immersive, thinking-man's first-person shooter. The game is laden with blood, action and in-your-face extremity, but complements it all with an interesting story, deeper scenes and well-presented characters. However, *Darkness* is only *Riddick* in principle. Practically, it's a very different game.
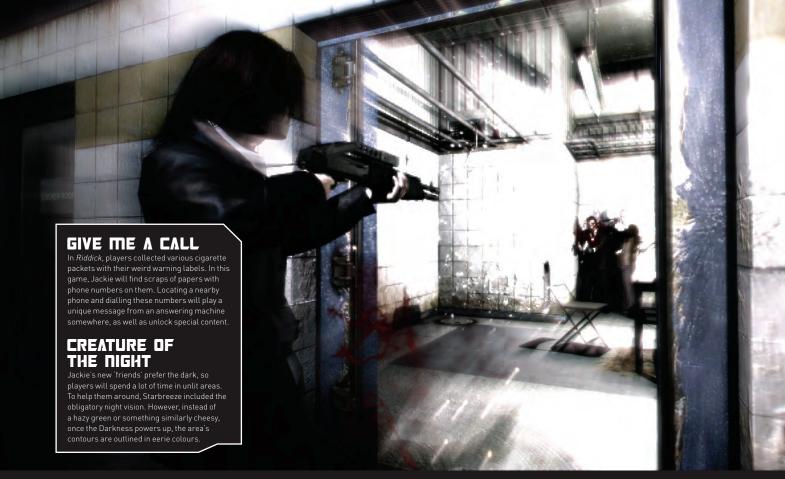
It all starts with the Starbreeze staple: an in-game credit sequence where the player controls the camera. The scene is inside a convertible, occupied by you and two fellow mobsters. You are off on a job to kill someone at a rival outfit's construction yard. However, things quickly turn bad and end in a devastating car accident. You're the only surviving and you have to complete the job on your own.

This first level allows players to get used to the feel of the gunplay. Using dual pistols, Jackie is one dangerous individual and his targets need to move fast to avoid him. Not that he boasts any special abilities - the game's targeting system is just quite responsive and has a small auto-aim margin. While he cannot lean around corners, Jackie will lift the respective weapons relative to a nearby surface. In other words, you can aim one gun around a corner while the other rests in an upward position. Shooting opponents is very satisfying, partially thanks to their death slumps that cleverly blend animation with rag doll physics. The atmosphere is enhanced even more by the deep lighting model. Using an enhanced version of the *Riddick* engine, it's very moody - but not purely cosmetic. The Darkness doesn't like light.

Soon into the code, Jackie gets some of his powers. The initial abilities allow him to control serpent-like monsters that can

GIVE ME A CALL

In *Riddick*, players collected various cigarette packets with their weird warning labels. In this game, Jackie will find scraps of papers with phone numbers on them. Locating a nearby phone and dialling these numbers will play a unique message from an answering machine somewhere, as well as unlock special content.

CREATURE OF THE NIGHT

Jackie's new 'friends' prefer the dark, so players will spend a lot of time in unlit areas. To help them around, Starbreeze included the obligatory night vision. However, instead of a hazy green or something similarly cheesy, once the Darkness powers up, the area's contours are outlined in eerie colours.

500 channels and nothing to watch

sneak into all kinds of places and snap the heads off unsuspecting bad guys. He can also commandeer knee-high imps that come in four flavours. Later on, his abilities include a giant tentacle for impaling things or lifting heavy objects, as well as a miniature black hole. The serpent heads are perhaps the most functional, since they can devour the hearts of killed foes. Hearts help enhance Jackie's abilities, plus they fill the power of the Darkness, which is drained when exposed to light. While the game wasn't very intuitive in explaining the powers to us, eventually it became very simple: launch the serpent towards an enemy, snap his head off, devour his heart and recharge enough to reach the next guy. Just make sure you remain in the shadows and out of a bullet's trajectory.

If anything was wrong with the game, it's the rather confusing level design. Using the subway system and phone calls, Jackie finds his way around the city and missions. Often a character would give an address, but you would only see the neighbourhoods on the map, resulting in aimless wandering. You don't get lost completely, but it breaks the flow a bit. The subway system isn't very obvious either, but none of these problems was an issue after about twenty minutes of playing. A few dramatic twists later (which we won't dare revealing), and the code hit its limit. In this brief play period, though, it's clear that *The Darkness* will be pretty elaborate and likely much longer than *Riddick*. Like *Riddick*, it's hard to explain why *The Darkness* is going to be great, but suffice to say, if you liked the one you'll like the other. It looks sharp, acts smart and plays well. Impatient gamers might snarl at it at first, but it should be really good. **NAG**
James Francis

SUMMONING THE DARKNESS

Marc Silvestri is the award-winning co-creator and artist of The Darkness.

What are your thoughts on other comic book to videogame translations? Has anyone else done it right?
There hasn't been a lot done right, which I think caused some scepticism from gamers when Starbreeze announced that their next big game would be based on a comic. Starbreeze has set the bar with *The Darkness* though. And not just for comic-based games.

Where do you get your main inspiration from for your illustrations?
A very scary place obviously! My creative inspirations are born from a desire to turn ideas on their head and do something a little different. That's where the horror/supernatural/sc-fi/superhero mash-ups come from. I don't have much interest in guys with tights and capes (although Batman is one of my favourite characters).

Artistically, my inspiration comes from

a wide variety that's kind of all over the map. Painters like Frank Frazetta and J.C. Leyendecker, comic book guys like Mike Mignola, John Buscema, and Jim Lee, and filmmakers like Ridley Scott, James Cameron, and Stanley Kubrick. So yeah, I pull inspiration from many directions.

What visual elements are you most excited about seeing translated into the game?
The whole feel and tone of the game is amazing. Starbreeze nailed the world of Jackie and especially The Darkness itself. That and those little bastard Darklings! I nearly piss myself every time they're on screen.

How did you come up with the idea of the Darkness (powers)? What was your inspiration when you started working on the comic?
The Darkness is celebrating its ten-year anniversary this year (which is nice timing

with the game, by the way), but the idea is really about 12 or 13 years old. I've always been fascinated with the idea of "be careful what you wish for" and being granted absolute power could and should bring a boatload of problems with it. The trick is to make those problems fun and interesting and not too weighty and dull. Plus I've always had this love/hate relationship with the dark (literally and figuratively). I'm drawn to it, but it sometimes scares the hell out of me.

I wanted a guy who was trapped in not only the physical world of the dark, but the spiritual/internal world as well. I tossed the idea at David Wohl (which happened often), who was Top Cow's editor-in-chief at the time, and he liked it. I was tired of drawing a team book (*Cyber Force*) and wanted a single character, so Jackie was perfect. Moreover, by design, he would be part of a creepy world filled with horrible things I could draw, which

brought me back to when I was digging on classic monster movies as a kid. All we needed was a writer with the right voice. That guy turned out to be Garth Ennis. Garth is a great writer who has a knack for making antihero's likable. He made Jackie a really cool badass that you were both repelled and drawn to. Perfect.

Have your drawing skills evolved over the years? If so, can you describe how exactly?
I'd like to think that as time goes by I've gotten better, but some fans may disagree! I always tell the other artists here at Top Cow that the main thing that's going to keep you going in this business is a desire to tell stories and get better doing it. When that desire goes away, it's time to think about a career change. You see it a lot where it's obvious someone is at the drawing board to just pay the bills. I'd rather move on to something else at that point because I'm not doing anyone any favours, including myself, by drawing without passion. I think allowing myself to try new things artistically has helped. People familiar with my work can still tell it's I, but I like to experiment once in a while. The main goal, though, is to be interested and you do that by not getting comfortable.

How did the idea of developing a videogame about *The Darkness* come about? Was it your idea, or Starbreeze's? In addition, how were you involved in the production process? Can you tell us a bit about the collaboration with the developer/publisher? Did you directly take part in the development of the game, or did you leave it all to the developers?
We've always wanted to do a videogame and we've had developers approach us over the years, but it was never the right combination until Starbreeze came along. Matt Hawkins

from Top Cow worked with Rich Liebowitz from Union and put the deal together and they did a terrific job. I'm not sure Starbreeze was all that familiar with the comic, but once they read it, they just got what it could be and put together an amazing pitch of what they thought the game would be like. Sold!

Both Starbreeze and 2K have been amazing. We're lucky to have a first-class developer and a first-class publisher. All parties involved have been very respectful of us as a company, and from the beginning understood that *The Darkness* was one of our biggest franchises. They went out of their way to make sure we were okay with any ideas or concepts they had that were not from the comic. It was cool to see that every decision they made was in the interest of better gameplay and not just for the sake of changing something because they could. And really, as fans of the comic will see, they didn't change who Jackie is or what *The Darkness* is. They just made it real and playable.
When you put a deal together - and I don't care whether it's a movie, ad, TV show, or a videogame - all you can really do is get the best people you possibly can and then just back off and let them do their job. We at Top Cow cannot develop or publish a videogame, but Starbreeze and 2K sure as hell can. So we contribute what we're good at and let them do what they do. Sometimes that doesn't work out the way you intended, but as gamers will soon see, in this case the results couldn't have been better.

Do you think Starbreeze understood how to transmit the complex soul of the 'comic' Jackie to the 'game' Jackie?
Absolutely. They nailed it. Hard.

What do you feel when you see some of the characters you have created for the printed

comics 'come to live' in the videogame? How did you feel when you first saw your character in 3D? What did you think when you saw Jackie 'becoming alive'?
You always hold you're breath when you cross over into other media, but even from the preproduction artwork, I knew we were in good hands. When I saw the first builds of the game and I saw Jackie move, I got goose bumps.

How do you feel about the possibility of taking some of your other titles to the screen? Which one would you choose first? *Witchblade, Hunter Killer...*
Right now, we have an interest in both titles. I think both would make killer games.

What is it like to co-op with a videogame developer such as Starbreeze?
These guys are the best and the creative relationship has been incredible. I would love to do more with them.

How far are the story and art elements from the actual comic books transferred into the videogame?
Starbreeze stayed very true to the spirit of the comic. In fact, there is a scene in a slaughterhouse from a Dale Keown drawn issue that is taken directly from the book. I thought it was a nice tip of the hat to the fans and us. The fact that Starbreeze worked on the game with Paul Jenkins, one of the writers of the comic, proved to us they wanted to stay true to the books.

Did you have to cut things back, or was it an opportunity to increase the content?
This was a case of more is more! Starbreeze added so much cool stuff that we're going to incorporate many of the game ideas into the comic. **NAG**

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING

ACTRAISER [VIRTUAL CONSOLE]
We spotted this little gem on the Wii Shopping Channel under the Super Nintendo category, and for only 600 Points (about $6) we just couldn't resist. An interesting blend of action and strategy, *ActRaiser* has you playing a god trying to reclaim territory lost to monsters. After heading down and kicking ass side-scrolling style, you get a top-down management view where you have to direct your followers, telling them where to build and what to destroy. Even after all these years, it still manages to shine as a daring mix of genres that captivated back in the day.

WII SPORTS [WII]
Usually free stuff isn't that great, but *Wii Sports* is simply the most perfect free game to get with your Wii. It has Bowling, Baseball, Tennis, Boxing and Golf – with Bowling and Baseball being our favourites so far. The Bowling is so easy to just pick up and play. Passing the Wiimote from player to player, it's practically the ultimate party game. Baseball is fun because it offers the most direct translation between how you hold and swing the Wiimote and the baseball bat on screen. *Wii Sports* even has a Fitness mode where you try to lower your 'Fitness Age' through physical exertion.

FALLOUT 2 [PC]
With all the intolerable excitement surrounding the recent release of a teaser trailer for *Fallout 3*, we just had to dig out our battered copy of *Fallout 2* and relive the awesomeness – with a few twists, of course. This time, for example, we tried (and succeeded) in dusting the entire raider encampment from beyond their locked gates, picking them off one by one using a sniper rifle, while they milled about angrily and feebly hefted submachine guns that didn't have the range to reach us. Hilarity ensued! We haven't yet reached New Reno, but our eyes are on that Porn Star reputation.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3 [360]
RTS on a console? Yes, okay, we're all used to that idea by now. The idea of a strategy game on a console is nothing new and a few prominent PC RTS titles have already tossed their hat into the arena. This doesn't mean we'll definitely see games like *StarCraft II* appear on platforms other than the beige box, but the model exists. That's pretty clear with this 360 rendition of *Command & Conquer 3*. Using *LOTR*'s sticky cursor, the game is very responsive and a lot of fun. Unfortunately, the difficulty level, even on Easy, soon becomes a problem for novice players.

EXCITE TRUCK [WII]
While *Excite Truck* may look very much like a GameCube game (since it really is), the interaction between it and the Wiimote takes it just that one little step further. You steer by holding the Wiimote sideways and tilting it, but the real fun of the game is in how the terrain can be morphed when you hit special markers. Flat roads suddenly become mountains to ramp, or steep cliff-side curves will lower to give you a slick path through the water (which allows you to boost without overheating). It may not be the best game ever, but it's great fun.

080

090

088

084

094

WEB SCORES

ENCHANTED ARMS		FULL AUTO 2 (PS3)		RATCHET & CLANK SIZE MATTERS	
NAG	58	NAG	55	NAG	90
METACRITIC	63	METACRITIC	67	METACRITIC	85
GAMERANKINGS	62	GAMERANKINGS	67	GAMERANKINGS	87

092

094

095

078

HEROES OF GAMING
They assemble! They fight! The review games for what's right! Heroes of Gaming, each and everyone one of them – here they are now, listed non-alphabetically!

Alex Jelagin
Master of strategy and occult arts. Alex is nigh invulnerable whenever near a blue flag.

Tarryn van der Byl
Tarryn uses her mental powers and extensive vocabulary to confuse the minds of lesser gamers.

Eddie Francis
Faster than a speeding bullet, Eddie doesn't actually need a car, but good luck trying to take it from him.

Miktar Dracon
Rumored to become a strange reptilian creature each full moon, he reviews like no reviewer before.

James Francis
Master of chaos and atmospheric effects, James is unpredictable, and the leader of the team.

Ryan Kalis
With the incredible ability to just be capable, Ryan fights crime using his underpants, at a distance.

Justin Slabbert
At an early age, Justin could talk, walk and do the Time Warp again. And again.

Sean James
With the power of flight, Sean flies the majestic fluid flight of the flying man. FLYING MAN!

Adam Liebman
With the super sexy power of sultry synonyms, Adam is one for the ladies.

WOW BURNING CRUSADE		GUITAR HERO II		SPIDER-MAN 3 (360)	
NAG	87	NAG		NAG	40
METACRITIC	91	METACRITIC	93	METACRITIC	64
GAMERANKINGS	91	GAMERANKINGS	93	GAMERANKINGS	69

MMMMMMM ... SHINY!

A quick guide to the *NAG* reviews section

PC SPEC: Will this game rape your machine, or make it fly? Check the box at the bottom right for an explanation on our fancy hardware rating system.

VITAL INFO: A game can't survive without these vitals, so you should probably pay attention to them.

BETTER THAN/WORSE THAN: Everything is relative, right? Because of that, we keep making comparisons between games in this space, and try to be funny about it.

SCORE: You only care about this number, we know that. But try to pretend you read the reviews because they're so insightful and informative. Thank you, we love you.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

PLATFORMS: The brightest block is the platform on which the game was reviewed. Dimmer blocks are platforms on which the game also appears. Simple.

GAME NAME: This is the important bit, and you might want to write it down somewhere just in case you need it later.

AWARDS: You won't find these *NAG* awards, given to games of merit, anywhere but in *NAG*. Truth.

ICONS: Check the list on the right for our frikkin' sweet icons, distilling the essence of games even further, just for you.

BOTTOM LINE: It all comes down to this, and the words written here will shape the future, moulding it towards gaming excellence.

DISTRIBUTOR LIST

For your convenience, the numbers of the distribution companies

Aleet Distribution	[011] 888-8916	Legend Memory	[011] 314-0817
Apex International	[012] 347-9956	Logitech SA	[011] 656-3375
Asbis	[011] 848 7000	Look & Listen	[011] 467-3717
ASUS SA	[011] 783-5450	Megarom	[011] 234-2680
Axiz	[011] 237-7000	Microsoft	[011] 265-3000
Comstar	[011] 314-5812	MiDigital	[011] 723-1800
Comztek	0860 600-557	MobileG	084 245 5400
Corex	[011] 238-2315	Pinnacle	[011] 265-3000
Creative	[011] 849-2021	Proton Technology	[011] 466-8888
Devon	[041] 365-0258	Rectron	[011] 203-1000
EA South Africa	[011] 516-8300	Sahara	[011] 542-1000
Esquire	0861 70 0000	Ster Kinekor Games	[011] 445-7960
Eurobyte	[011] 234-0142	The Outer Limits	[011] 482-3771
Frontosa	[011] 466-0038	WWE	[011] 462-0150
Greenstone Interactive	[021] 557-6248	Tuerk Music	[011] 792-8402

If your company isn't listed here, phone *NAG* at [011] 704-2679

CORRECTION

In the June issue, the Megarom PC budget titles on page 89 were priced at R199. The correct price is R89.

THE REVIEW ICONS

The *NAG* review icons aim to help you get a better idea of what a game is like, while giving us less work to do in the review. Everyone wins, so best memorise this list below and look out for them in the Review score box.

ACTION: When you gotta blast, smash, crash and mash your way to victory, it's Action.

BABYSITTING: Put the kids to bed, you gotta Babysit this game to make it love you.

BITCHIN': When a game just plain rocks despite everything, then it is worthy of the Bitchin'.

BORING: Grab your blankie and teddy, we might be in for some Boring to put you to sleep.

BUGGY: Truth be told, there is just no excusing a Buggy game because games aren't cheap.

CASH-IN/LICENSE: Some companies totally Cash-in on License games, good or bad.

CINEMATIC: Sweet-ass cutscenes, dramatic camerawork and awesome scenes are Cinematic.

CLONE: We've seen it before and we'll see it again, because people always Clone good stuff.

COMPETITIVE: You don't think Ranked Match is a feature; you think it should be mandatory.

FOREIGN: No clue what the game is about or even what is said? Confusing plot? Careful, it might be Foreign!

ONLINE: For games that play well with others and generally mean playing with others, Online.

PARTY: Get some friends and move the couch, Party games are frikkin' sweet.

PIECE OF POO: Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you just can't squeeze a diamond out of a turd.

STUPID PEOPLE: Don't worry little buddy, this game holds your hand like a friend.

ALL AGES: These games contain no violence, immoral acts or anything that might narrow the demographic, but they may still be difficult.

KID FRIENDLY: Kids can play this game without needing an adult every five minutes to explain to them what button to press.

16+ RESTRICTION: If you're 16 or over, you are well within your rights to play this game.

18+ RESTRICTION: If you are not yet 18, please put down this game and back away slowly before the police come and arrest you.

MULTIPLAYER: The number on the contoller icon indicates the maximum number of people who can play at at the same time.

WILL IT RUN? – PC GAME SPECS

PC game specs are a pain for us, because we need to list them for those people who don't consult the box before buying a game. Instead, the reviews will now have a nice number ranking on the side. Higher numbers mean a game is more machine intensive. If a game has all the numbers lit up, it'll run on a 5-year-old piece of junk up to the most bad-ass of machines.

5 Your machine has a DirectX 10 graphics card, a dual-core or higher CPU and 2GB or more RAM. You are the centre of gaming-fu. This game will honour your investment. **[DX10 graphics card; dual-core CPU; 2GB+ RAM]**

4 Your graphics card has a respectable 256MB of memory and your CPU sits at the higher end of 2GHz, backed by 1-2GB of RAM. A worthy rig for a worthy game. **[256MB graphics card with DX9; 2GHz or more; 1-2GB RAM]**

3 Your card sits between 128 and 256MB of RAM with at least DirectX 8 support, while your 2GB Pentium 4 churns happily with between 512MB and 1GB of RAM. We assume you're slowly saving for an upgrade. **[256MB+ graphics card with DX8; 2GHz Pentium 4; 512MB-1GB RAM]**

2 Okay, so you have a graphics card that falls below the 128MB memory point but supports DX8, a chip that you can't call 2GHz even if you wanted and you have 256MB or less RAM. Your PC might be getting more Office action than you'd like to admit. **[128MB or lower graphics card with DX8; Below 2GHz chip; 256MB or lower RAM]**

1 You really don't think about your PC specs much. In fact, any hint of upgrade money is spent on something more practical, like a coffee maker with a timer. Fresh coffee first thing in the morning always beats playing games. **[Can run XP, will play game]**

SyncMaster 932 BF

D8350

SAMSUNG

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appreciate the ultimate
in viewing performance

Samsung 932BF Monitor

Magic Speed
Operating at a fast response time of 2ms eliminates blurry images and ghosting; making your entertainment more entertaining. The ideal tool to compliment to your gaming, image viewing, or digital dreaming. Enjoy always having a clear picture of what you want to see. Fast image processing enables vivid precision quality on digital screens whilst viewing movies and games. The super fast response time produces exceptionally clear digital images with no after images or trace effects.

Magic Color
As if by magic, enjoy vibrant colours. Samsung's Magic Color chip really is what its name suggests. With colour tone control, gamma control and intelligent colour enhancement, colours instantly appear vividly real.

Magic Tune
Magic tune software enables you to control brightness, contrast and colour levels by the simple clicks of a mouse. Nothing could more conveniently optimize the way you interface with your computer.

Magic Bright II
Changing the way you view separate images has never been simpler. Select the best mode to meet your viewing environment needs. Text, Internet, Game, Sports and Movie modes are provided. Each can be easily accessed by using the Magic Bright II button.

MagicSpeed 2ms

MagicColor

MagicTune™

MagicBright²

Distributed by:

TAHSUS

SAHARA
THE ULTIMATE IN PCs

SAMSUNG

RRP→ R799 | Publisher→ Activision | Distributor→ Megarom | Genre→ Rhythm

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

GUITAR HERO II

DEVELOP SOMETHING THAT MAKES people feel like they're rock stars and they'll buy it. Who would have guessed? Beat-game veteran Harmonix's *Guitar Freak* adaptation took the world by storm. Out of nowhere, *Guitar Hero* surprised everyone and became incredibly addictive. It also proved highly accessible and it's a bit of a crime that so little merit is given to the series for embracing the non-gaming public. Quite simply put, I've never seen any other game being played so much. Throughout *Guitar Hero* and *Guitar Hero II*'s reigns in my living room, everyone from jaded gamers to anti-game girlfriends eventually took a stab at it. You simply cannot resist the urge to Rock.

South Africa took a bit longer to get onto this bandwagon, and *Guitar Hero* only appeared locally late last year. However, since then it has arrived more or less on time, and the 360 version of *Guitar Hero II* is a sell-out success, as many fans who struggled to get the game can tell you. Therefore, at this stage of the game, it's fair to assume you're not planning to get the game. Nevertheless, I'm not kidding when I say that if you have the appropriate platform – namely a PS2 or 360 – you must get this game. It's worth every cent and then some. *Guitar Hero II* is a simple rhythm game in which you hold down single or groups of buttons that come up on a moving grid on screen, all while using your other hand to 'strum' the notes. It takes a bit of practise to crack and many

novices have complained about the game's difficulty. However, it's not really that hard and becomes intuitive very quickly. If you start at the easiest difficulty, which only uses three of the controller's buttons, you'll have it down pat in no time.
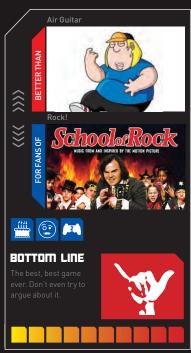
Besides, it's worth the effort. Soon you'll be jamming to Rage's *Killing in the Name Of*, Black Sabbath's *War Pigs*, *Hush* by Deep Purple, My Chemical Romance's *Dead*, The Police with *Message in a Bottle* and *Heart-Shaped Box* by Nirvana. At the far end, you can even try crazy tunes like Reverend Horton Heat's *Psychobilly Freakout*, *Hangar 18* by Megadeth or Iron Maiden's demanding *The Trooper*. In total, there are over 50 songs included in the 360 release, including some great bonus tracks. If you go to the length of getting a second controller (unfortunately, at this stage it will mean buying the game twice), you won't be disappointed. The multiplayer options cater for serious one-on-one battles, to playing against each other on different difficulties, or even playing a song co-op. Unfortunately, the only online support is a leader board that has already been ruined by save-game punks - a low point for an otherwise excellent game.

Overall, this is one of the best games you can buy, especially with the 80's expansion and *Guitar Hero III* looming ahead. Once you have the well-designed and unbelievably resilient controller, you'll get a lot of mileage out of it. It's the ultimate party game. It's the

ultimate rhythm game. It's one damn good reason to get a PS2 or 360. It's *Guitar Hero II*. Go get it already! **NAG**

James Francis

NAG ›››
EDITOR'S
CHOICE

Air Guitar

BETTER THAN

Rock!

FOR FANS OF

School of Rock
MUSIC FROM AND INSPIRED BY THE MOTION PICTURE

BOTTOM LINE
The best, best game ever. Don't even try to argue about it.

EA SPORTS™

RUGBY 08

Ugh! My underwear is all bunched up again!

SPIDER-MAN 3

OUR SPIDEY-SENSE IS TINGLING! However, it's sending us mixed signals about a game which, by now, should really have gotten to grips with its content. Yep, Spider-Man is back for a third instalment, and while it swings high and glorious, every so often it also unceremoniously splats into a wall. The game certainly seems to be an improvement on its two predecessors. However, is that enough?

Taking place in a miniaturised New York city, you'll want to spend a good deal of time just swinging around and perching on rooftops, admiring the beauty of the game. The city truly seems to have been lovingly recreated. However, if we wanted to simply stop and stare, we'd put ourselves on the next plane to the Big Apple itself. So what about the action? Well, the storyline is not nearly so beautiful. There are ten missions to choose from, each with its own story thread including one based on the plot of the movie. With missions opening up in a mishmash manner, it becomes pretty difficult to keep track of each story. Each mission unlocks new moves, which add to Spidey's repertoire and strength, and fighting, with fists or web, works well. However, in 30 years of gaming could we not, perhaps, finally evolve from the 'beating up the little henchmen, then face the Big Boss' scenario? Not in *Spider-Man 3*!

Working as a type of infrared view on proceedings, the new Spidey-Sense feature allows our hero to spot lurking enemies and also pinpoint areas that need to be explored. This adds a fantastic puzzle element to the game and is a nice diversion from the baddie-bashing. Spidey's Black Suit also makes a cameo appearance, adding depth to the gameplay and turning our geeky hero into a downright bastard. Wear the thing too long, and New York becomes evil, darker and dirtier.

The game, though, is let down in a number of crucial ways. The camera, for instance, is abhorrent. Crawling upside down on a ceiling will confuse the heck out of any Spider-Man, lady, boy or girl as the camera continuously flips at inopportune moments. Moreover, being beaten up by unseen enemies, thanks once again to the camera, just sucks. Then there's the press-a-certain-button-on-your-gamepad-before-a-certain-time-or-do-it-again-and-again-until-you-get-it-right charade. Is this next-gen gaming? We think not. Moreover, is Mr Toby McGuire really an actor? Our friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man seems to have been squashed underfoot. He sounds so deflated.

Despite these disappointments, the game will almost certainly snare you in its web. There's just too much good going on that cannot be ignored, but its faults are, nevertheless, aggravatingly glaring.

Spider-Man 3 has left us slightly underwhelmed. Let's hope Activision uses its power more responsibly in *Spider-Man 4*. **NAG**

Ryan Kalis

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

BETTER THAN
Swinging through New York naked

ALSO BETTER THAN
Watching the actual movie

BOTTOM LINE

Swings in looking majestic, but not quite as sharp in terms of gameplay.

70 OUT OF 100

PS2 OPINION

Oooh, it's another game of the movie. And this one is doubly guaranteed to be rubbish, as the cash cow on which it suckles (that's the movie, for those who don't do metaphors) is feeble and sickly, and generally agreed to deserve a swift and brutal beheading. Okay, they've also tossed in comic-book villains, Lizard, Kraven, and Morbius, and a few other generic action game elements (thugs), but it's just not enough to redeem this insipid game.

In theory, it's a sort of free-roaming action game, where you get to march and fling Spidey all over Manhattan, and do all kinds of butch heroic stuff. In reality, it's a boring drag through bland streets, doing inane things like rummaging through the trash looking for other people's lost crap. Yes, you can slither into the symbiote (that natty black suit) whenever you like for some bonus combat cool, but it becomes increasingly difficult (i.e. more dull-eyed button mashing) to get that damnable thing off afterwards, so it's really not worth the effort. The combat system itself is a dog's breakfast. After breaking enough faces, you can even level up. Nevertheless, you'll probably be playing something else by then anyway. **NAG**

Tarryn "Excuse me while I just swing out of here" van der Byl

40 OUT OF 100

PC OPINION

Spider-Man 3 is finally out on various platforms including the PC. However, is it as good using a keyboard and mouse as the consoles' gamepads? No, it's frustrating, to say the least, and almost unplayable at certain parts. The game is, however, very pretty and has some sweet eye candy for those who like to scale buildings and watch the sun set over the Manhattan skyline. Those who have played *Spider-Man 2* will notice that the third instalment is practically the same, but with better visuals and new villains like the New Goblin, Sandman, Venom, Lizard and Hunter, as well as appearances by Kingpin and Scorpion. Another interesting feature is the ability to use the new black spider suit after it's unlocked, which can be extremely useful in tight situations. This suit makes Spidey stronger, faster and a whole lot angrier when it comes to pounding on bad guys. The storyline, however, leaves a lot to be desired as it's too scattered and divided between the various villains. Nevertheless, isn't that what superheroes face in their various comics? In the end though, *Spider-Man 3* is a good superhero simulator, but better on consoles with dual analogue controllers. Perhaps invest in a good gamepad if you buy this. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert

73 OUT OF 100

The really bad news is that's the refueling plane...

Hidden Target: Complete
Enemy Aircraft: Destroyed

SPD 320 km/h
ALT 2010 m
HDG 262 deg

Engine: On Fire
Power: 50%
Player: Wounded

PC Spec → | Flight | Genre → Megarom | Distributor → Ubisoft | Publisher → R279 | RRP →

1 2 3 4 5

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

IL-2 STURMOVIK: 1946

IL-2 STURMOVIK: 1946 IS the next instalment in the successful *IL-2* series, following *Forgotten Battles*, the *Ace Expansion Pack* and *Pacific Fighters*. As before, the focus is on World War II action as seen from a Soviet perspective. The default campaigns take place over former USSR territories, including West Germany, and the Nordic territories during the closing stages of the war. This release isn't limited to the Soviet Air Force or the Soviet front. WWII combat pilot wannabes can also fly for any of the air forces that campaigned during the war. Thirty-two new aircraft have been added, bringing the total to 329, and now includes the legendary MiG-9 and some pretty nasty German jets. (German jets were notorious for killing their pilots before they could engage the enemy! Achtung!) All the well-know aircraft like the P-51 Mustang, BF109 and legendary Spitfire are also included.

The simulation futures good graphics with convincing detail built into all the aircraft. The moving bits and pieces lack detailed animation, but this does little to detract from the gameplay. Ground textures are crispy clear: a good thing when you're engaged in a ground attack as it makes spotting the target much easier. The scenery textures are still some way off compared to *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*. Most combat flight simulators seem to devote less attention to this all-important aspect. The sound effects were

recorded in Dolby Digital format and can only be fully appreciated on a mid- to high-end sound system. This was tested on a Logitech 5.1 system with stunning panoramic sound. The sound quality was good, but the volume and lack of sub-base during explosions were disappointing.

The flight dynamics of the aircraft are very accurate as this isn't an arcade-style, shoot-'em-up game, but a combat flight simulation for hardcore simmers! Some knowledge of how aircraft fly and lots of practice are the keys to success in your career as a fighter pilot. The game does, however, feature a quick-combat mode for instant action. The simulation lacks an interactive targeting system as used in *MS CFS* and some of the default campaigns take too long to complete. Hardcore flight combat simmers would appreciate this, however, as it adds to the realism. The adjustable skill levels will ensure that even the novice pilot will have some success within hours of installing the game.

IL-2 provides a powerful campaign creation tool that allows you to create a battle or entire war including variables that will determine the outcome, depending on your success as a pilot. The title's success over its rivals is probably due to the steady stream of expansions being released by the developers and the ability to create additional campaigns within the game. No additional software is required for this. The game offers the

potential of longevity for hardcore simmers, but casual gamers will become bored quite quickly. **NAG**

Sean James

Microsoft Combat Flight Simulator

BETTER THAN

Falcon 4.0: Allied Forces

AS GOOD AS

BOTTOM LINE

An immersive combat flight simulation that pips Microsoft's Combat Flight Simulation series by some way.

75
OUT OF 100

WATCH OUT
for the next
EIDOS
GAMING
SALE

NU METRO
Interactive

eidos

RRP→ R499 | **Publisher**→ Sony Computer Entertainment | **Distributor**→ SK Games | **Genre**→ Action Platformer

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

RATCHET & CLANK: SIZE MATTERS

EVERY NOW AND THEN (certainly not often enough for us to become bloated and complacent in the gilded palaces of games journalism), a game comes along that really turns the Awesome-O-Meter up to eleven. *Ratchet & Clank*'s first foray onto Sony's handheld is one of these devilishly rare little critters.

While soaking up the synthetic sun and delicately sipping synthetic piña coladas out on the synthetic beaches of resort planet Pokitaru, Ratchet (that's bobcat) and Clank (that's robot) are approachable by a lovable li'l tyke, who begs the dynamite duo to bust out a few heroics for her camera. What starts off as a somewhat half-hearted trot around the dunes blasting crabs, conveniently turns into a grand, intergalactic adventure when Luna (that's lovable tyke) is snatched by evil robots. Through a plot that loops the loop, from the gloomy jungle ruins of a long-forgotten race of inventor geniuses to some sort of evil medical experimental orbital station, and weaves in and out of the very stars themselves, Ratchet and his diminutive robotic sidekick will enthral even the most jaded player. This game oozes charm like snot from a five year old – in great big buckets.

The bulk of the game plays like a moderately combat-heavy platformer – much like previous *Ratchet & Clank* titles, and something a little like *LEGO Star Wars*, but somewhat tougher. This is interspersed with a number of (often optional) mini games, including hover board races, a *Robot Wars*-style demolition derby, and several sequences where Clank takes control of a laser turret and toasts incoming nasties while Ratchet fiddles with fuses and stuff. The frequency with which the gameplay changes makes for a marvellously varied and constantly engaging experience.

As is expected from a *Ratchet & Clank* outing, there's an array of zany doom bringers at hand to deal out the hurt, while using them will level them up and make them just that much more gratuitously violent. Your trusty standard issue Lacerator, for example, will eventually become a pair of supercharged plasma cannons. There are also armour sets and a number of weapon modifications to buy or stumble across.

Visually, the game ranges from 'good' to 'z0mg'. The Gigantor Robo Clank (Go, go Gigantor Robo Clank!) space shooter sequence, in particular, delivers some of the sexiest PSP graphics we've seen, and with nary a dropped frame in sight. The various bits of the story, moreover, are glued together with some rather lovely little rendered cinematics that'll tease out your most gormless grin.

Seriously, this might just be one of those 'killer apps' you hear bandied about, and it's about time the PSP got one of its own. Buy it. **NAG**

Tarryn "Click Click Boom" van der Byl

NAG >>>
MUST PLAY

Your weekend plans

BETTER THAN

A big bowlful of awesome

KINDALIKE

BOTTOM LINE

A game so awesome, it might be consumed by its own awesomeness.

90
OUT OF 100

Raise your hands in the air like you just don't care!

RRP→ R265 | Publisher→ VU Games | Distributor→ MiDigital | Genre→ MMORPG

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

WORLD OF WARCRAFT IS by no means your average MMORPG: it has that special 'X-factor', which makes it unique to some and extremely addictive to others. After playing the game for a while, you will see what I mean. The detail that Blizzard has put into this MMORPG is immense, and with the new expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, they have once again outdone themselves. *TBC* adds an additional ten levels of experience for the player to achieve, allowing them to reach level 70. This expansion also allows for the use of flying mounts in the Outlands area for those who have enough gold. Nevertheless, never fear those who don't, because along with all these wholesome treats come new professions and items that will blow you away. Craft your own jewellery from scratch if you want and sell your wares to the highest bidder. Alternatively, go have a grinding session in the Outlands for some really cool items and sell them for extra bucks. One thing is for sure: if you have the time and endurance for a good instance in the Outlands, you won't be sorry. Unfortunately, this area is only really reachable after level 50. However, don't let that hold you back, because you might want to try out the new classes that have been added to the game, such as the Blood Elves,

if you are a horde player, or the Draenei for the Alliance. Both are unique for their sides and bring their own special advantages.

On my own journey to get through the dark portal, which has now opened and for non-fans of the *WarCraft* universe, was originally seen back in *Warcraft II*, I joined various guilds until eventually forming my own, where, along with all the perks of leading a guild, I found a group of people that I could quest with on a regular basis and even tackle some of those PvP battlegrounds. What I'm getting at here is that what makes *WoW* so unique compared to other MMOs is the fact that, although it focuses enormously on questing and such, it adds a level of socioeconomic realism, which makes it the poster child for MMOs of the future. Yes, you get games like *Guild Wars* and *Star Wars Galaxies*, but both focus on one specific area, whereas *WoW* tries successfully to be the balanced solution required.

If you're a fan of any MMO or even a *Warcraft* junkie, then *World of WarCraft* is perfect for you. It's a simple, easy to learn game, which spans a great fantasy world that could lead to months upon months of exploring. So, take up your arms and join a raid on a server near you!   **NAG**

Justin Slabbert

AS GOOD AS
Oblivion

FOR FANS OF
World of WarCraft

BOTTOM LINE
The MMORPG that shaped the market has a sequel.

87
OUT OF 100

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

RRP→ R399 | Publisher→ Electronic Arts | Distributor→ EA South Africa | Genre→ FPS

That building opresses post-modern architecture! Kill it!

MEDAL OF HONOR: VANGUARD

THE *MEDAL OF HONOR* series returns for another foray into World War II, this time starring paratrooper Frank Keegan. *Vanguard* follows the typical *Medal of Honor* formula, pitting your character against swarms of Nazi enemies over a number of missions, each introduced by a grainy black-and-white cut-scene to set the stage. The objectives are all quite familiar to the series, ranging from rescue missions and information retrieval, to planting explosives on enemy installations, as well as the mandatory shooting of legions of opposing soldiers.

In fact, few aspects of this game show any alteration from its predecessors. One of the few areas where things are different is that being a paratrooper, your character does - on occasion - parachute into the start of a level. The player has a limited degree of control over the flight of the parachute. Make a good landing, and you'll start the level off in an area with a number of power-ups on hand to make things a little easier for yourself. It's a nice touch, but adds nothing revolutionary to the game.

Another change is that your character now has the ability to run, achieved by holding down one of the shoulder buttons while moving your character (at least until your stamina bar runs out). This serves to deepen the play dynamic, but it's an improvement that should have been introduced much earlier on

in the franchise's life.

An area that hasn't seen any improvement is the artificial intelligence, much to the title's detriment. Both enemy soldiers as well as allies prove to be anything but battle savvy, with enemies even failing to turn around when being shot at from behind. In fact, aside from occasionally crouching behind boxes, they do very little else other than run forward and shoot. In an attempt to compensate for the lack of challenge posed by the AI, the developers seem to have decided to simply throw more and more enemies at you, particularly during the later levels. The overwhelmingly unfair odds, combined with a punishing checkpoint-restart system, make the later levels of the game horribly frustrating, especially compared to the laughably easy opening missions.

Visually, *Vanguard* does little to impress either, with many of the environments being dark and muddy. This makes it difficult to see the enemies shooting at you or even the path you're supposed to follow. The soundtrack, on the other hand, lives up to the high standards set by earlier titles in the series.

Vanguard is by no means a bad title: it's still fun, if occasionally frustrating, and will probably satisfy *Medal of Honor* junkies. Unfortunately, though, for the rest of us, it's just uninspired. It's nothing that hasn't been seen or done before. **NAG**

Adam Liebman

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

Every other Medal of Honor

KINDA LIKE

World War II

FOR FANS OF

BOTTOM LINE
Entertaining FPS, but nothing we haven't seen before.

67
OUT OF 100

OdB Cooling

RRP→ R699 | Publisher→ SEGA | Distributor→ Ster Kinekor | Genre→ Vehicular combat

It looks like the train will be late again.

FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES

IMAGINE DRIVING DOWN A road in the middle of a suburban concrete and glass jungle with a fast car packed with some heavy firepower. You see your target up ahead and you try to lock on with your missiles. You launch them, but miss and then pull the trigger on the two fully-automatic machineguns strapped to the bonnet. Your enemy's car explodes while the glass-packed building behind him explodes into thousands of shards that rain down upon you both as you take the corner at a skid and stop to watch the smoke rising from the car that, a few seconds ago, was your enemy's. This is what *Full Auto 2: Battlelines* was supposed to offer us in exchange for our hard-earned money, which we could have used to feed poor Timmy with. Instead, what we get is a mediocre James Bond style racing sim, which spent way too much time on the special effects and less on the actual gameplay. The game does feature some truly terrific graphics and settings that will have the player itching to destroy them, as well as some brilliant explosions, but sadly, that is all it really is. Game physics have been very poorly implemented for a racing sim, with some mediocre traction and gravity settings

evident. The guns also don't sound completely realistic and leave the player feeling unsatisfied with his or her latest kill.

The game does, however, have a nice selection of cars and weapons, with a few gadgets added in for extra spice. However, when trying the various types, one will notice how similar they all feel. Staples from the first game still feature. One is the ability to rewind play after a wreck, giving you a chance to have a second, maybe better, go at it. This is called 'Unwreck'. The other is the usual speed boost, which can be very useful in a tight situation.

The AI seems very rigid and mechanical - very different to what a normal person would drive like if in a similar situation.

In the end though, *Full Auto 2: Battlelines* is a very stable game, compared to its predecessor, with a framerate that keeps up to speed at all times. It can be fun for an hour or so, but after that, it starts getting too repetitive and clumsy. If you want a racing game, go play *Test Drive* or *Gran Turismo HD*. If you want action, well, there are countless other games more thrilling than this. **NAG**
Justin Slabbert

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

Streets of Sim City

KINDA LIKE

007 Racing

WORSE THAN

BOTTOM LINE
Apart from the visual effects, *Full Auto 2* does little to impress.

55
OUT OF 100

FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES

RRP→ R465 | **Publisher→** SEGA | **Distributor→** WWE | **Genre→** Vehicular combat

THE ARE CERTAIN GAME design premises that are just made of RULE and EPIC WIN. "Let's bolt rocket launchers, flamethrowers, chain guns, and laser cannons onto the sides of cars and blow stuff up," is one of these. Any game subscribing to this premise should logical, and therefore rock faster, harder, and longer than a Mötley Crüe reunion tour. And yet, somehow, despite such overwhelming odds in its favour, this game manages to suck on a phenomenal scale.

Maybe it's the interminable loading times, or the extraordinarily unhelpful 'xtreem cool but no real info supplied' HUD. Maybe it's the rather astonishing lack of any apparent physics in this sort of game that really does actually benefit from it (car + car = impact; not car + car = car clips through car). Maybe

the steering control can only be described as 'soggy'. Maybe it's the drab circuit design. Maybe it's because the control layout is best suited to an octo-pedal demographic. Maybe it's the fact that the whole caboodle is flimsily held together by a wild (read: stupid) plot that rivals *Zero Wing* in terms of baffling obfuscation (what does an evil weather-monitoring supercomputer have to do with breaking cars, anyway? What the hell is this Master/Slave Organisation they're banging on about? Why does an arcade destruct-o-racer need a plot?). Maybe it's because Wolfmother is on the soundtrack.

Maybe it's just that this game is simply way more than the sum of its parts, and in this case, that's a really horrible thing.

Yes, it has Game Sharing, but that just

means you can invite your pals around and make them cry – a good, old-fashioned shotgun blast to the face is not only more fun, it's really much more sincere. **NAG**

Tarryn "Catatonic" van der Byl

BOTTOM LINE
You'll only wish you'd bought something else.

35 OUT OF 100

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS

RRP→ R399 | **Publisher→** Bandai Namco | **Distributor→** Megarom | **Genre→** Racing

MAYBE, WITH THE RISING petrol prices, you want to burn rubber and tear up the road without facing bankruptcy. Maybe you'd like to immerse yourself in a fictional racing world, much like a movie you enjoyed. Alternatively, maybe, just maybe, you'd prefer just tweaking and modifying some of the most exciting cars in the world. Maybe *The Fast and the Furious* isn't for you. If you have any precious memories from watching the movies with loved ones, don't spoil them. Stay away from this game! Sure, it has some good aspects. The soundtrack is really interesting. There are some really funky Japanese songs and some of the movie characters are there. The back of the packaging promises an experience not to be forgotten: a wide rage of cars. It even claims

to be the number one game out there. The game even had input from real-life drifters like the US champion, Rhys Millen. However, you cannot believe everything you read. The reality is that if you keep driving into walls, don't worry: you still win, but you feel ripped off. You never get that feeling that you really achieved something, and though the cars look good, the rest of the game has been lit by the same coloured light, so everything looks roughly the same. There's an attempt to make travelling a fun part of the game, but it doesn't really gel. As far as the modding goes, there seems to be a standard for this by now, so all the aspects are there. Nevertheless, you cannot change things like ride height or gear ratios. There is a wide range of body parts, rims and spoilers, but

it just isn't *Juiced*. Overall, the game is bad. It's not fun to play and you really get nothing from it. You're better off watching the movies and fiddling your controller until the next racing game comes out. **NAG**

Eddie Francis

BOTTOM LINE
If racing games are meant to be fun, then this was never a racing game.

55 OUT OF 100

What did you say about my hat?

ENCHANTED ARMS

RRP→ R555 | **Publisher→** From Software/Ubisoft | **Distributor→** Megarom | **Genre→** RPG

THE NEW TURN-BASED RPG, *Enchanted Arms*, has at last been released for the PS3. However, is it what RPG fans have been waiting for? The game certainly does bring back the traditional turn-based style, but it lacks that certain something.
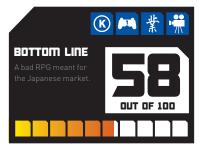
Over a thousand years ago, in the Enchanted Universe, there was a war between men and their manmade Golem servants. The war raged on with Golems, who were able to think for themselves, laying waste to the land until finally it was put to rest. Now, in the present day, that's all but a myth. Nevertheless, it looks like the Golem Wars are about to resurface again.

The game takes place in the Enchant University and players are put in charge of Atsuma, a lazy student with a weird addiction to pizzas. Why do I say this? Well, every so often you get these insane pizza-eating mini games in which you have to eat a certain amount of pizzas in a set amount of time. This is not as much fun as it sounds though, due to the fact that it really only involves button mashing.

The battle sequences are pretty simple though, using simple grid interfaces for moving your characters around and trying to get them into strategic locations so that they complement each other. Added factors are the elements Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. Each character will have an affinity to a particular one, making them better suited for certain scenarios.

It's a standard run-of-the-mill RPG with nothing that really jumps out at you, but could be worth a few hours of fun, depending on whether you have the patience to play while listening to some dreadful and often repetitive background soundtracks. This is one game that will soon be forgotten. **NAG**

Justin Slabbert

BOTTOM LINE
A bad RPG meant for the Japanese market.

58
OUT OF 100

DRIVER 76

RRP→ R449 | **Publisher→** Ubisoft | **Distributor→** Megarom | **Genre→** Racing

IT'S EASY TO QUICKLY disregard *Driver 76* as a *Grand Theft Auto* clone with no soul, but perhaps it's the funky soundtrack that just won't let me believe it. David Bowie, Blondie, Marvin Gaye and Funkadelic accompany you as you take on various missions and side-missions in this prequel to *Driver: Parallel Lines* (set two years before *Parallel Lines*) - and it's just too damn groovy!
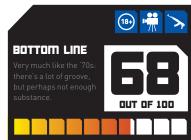
The underlying idea involves the player earning cash to win the girl, modify his or her ride and generally do what the titles says: drive. The 'authentic' '70s' New York comes across with as much clarity as the PSP can muster, albeit slightly marred by what might be considered excessive load times. Any toe-tapping done in impatience quickly disappears once you're actually in the mission, barrelling down the city streets, avoiding cops or trying to run down your target. The missions are a varied bunch, much like the multiplayer mini game types: destruction derby, pink-slip racing and so forth.

Über-cheesy, comic book-style cut-scenes fill the gaps between the City Map, where you choose what you want to do, and the actual driving itself, and they do a surprisingly effective job of getting you going. It's no *GTA*, but I'm still unclear why it is that every game that involves driving and on-foot shooting around a city has to be called a *GTA* clone. Surely, by now we can just call it a genre and get it over with! Not everything is a *Doom* clone anymore, after all. **NAG**

Miktar "Funky Thang" Dracon

BOTTOM LINE
Very much like the '70s: there's a lot of groove, but perhaps not enough substance.

68
OUT OF 100

OMG! How did the cat get up there?

Honey, I'm leaving you for him.

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

THE SIMS 2: CELEBRATION! STUFF

RRP→ R129 | **Publisher→** EA | **Distributor→** EA South Africa | **Genre→** Life simulation | **PC Spec→** 1 **2 3** 4 5

HOT ON THE HEELS of *Seasons*, about six months after *Happy Holiday Stuff*, and just skidding in before *H&M Fashion Stuff*, that great bloated and perennially pregnant *Sims* breeder toad has popped this party-themed *Celebration! Stuff* sprog. Will Wright must surely whip that wretched varmint raw.

Anyway, it's just more stuff, really. Clearly having caved in to vociferous community demands for wedding goodies (thanks for embracing the stereotype, oh legions of doe-eyed 13-year-old girls), there's a whole bag of nuptial paraphernalia, including dresses, suits, hairdos, miscellaneous kitsch, votive accessories, tottering marzipan cakes, and the

like. For birthdays and vanilla party-for-the-sake-of-party-type parties, you have bottomless buffets, swanky tables and chairs, banners, decorations, and the new Hob-O-Chan 300 outdoor grill (party wieners that look just like regular wieners, hurrah!). Just about everything in the new catalogue is being eaten by balloons or streamers, just to really ram home that 'PARTY! WE'RE HAVING A FRICKIN' PARTY HERE!' theme, in case anyone missed it.

It's a mite skimpy on content compared to, say, *Family Fun Stuff*, but there's enough wholesomely tacky junk here to throw a rippin' good BBQ. **NAG**

Tarryn "YAY, CAKE!" van der Byl

BOTTOM LINE
More swag! Yay!

73 OUT OF 100

SOCOM U.S. NAVY SEALS: COMBINED ASSAULT

RRP→ R451 | **Publisher→** SCEI | **Distributor→** Ster Kinekor Games | **Genre→** Action

THE *SOCOM* SERIES OF games, developed by Zipper Interactive, makes its final appearance on the PS2 with *Combined Assault*. The series is widely touted overseas as being the best that the PS2 has to offer in terms of online shooters, though the single-player component of the games has often felt lacking. *Combined Assault* aims to rectify this and succeeds, to an extent, but despite its improvements, the game still feels rather unpolished.

Set in the fictitious state of Adjikistan, *Combined Assault* sees you in command of a group of Navy SEALs, seeking to restore order to the war-torn state. The campaign stretches over 18 missions, set in a number of environments within the country. In addition to the typical primary and secondary objectives, there are now also bonus objectives, which may involve capturing

a certain number of enemies, or finding hidden items in order to unlock rewards. The campaign is also less linear, with the player being given some freedom in choosing which mission to tackle next. Unfortunately, this also results in the mediocre storyline feeling slightly less than cohesive.

The game dynamic is largely unchanged from *SOCOM 3*, which unfortunately means that all of its predecessor's flaws return to plague *Combined Assault*, most noticeable of which is the poor AI. It's not an uncommon occurrence for either teammates or enemy characters to end up simply walking in place because of the poor path-finding AI. Furthermore, enemies show little in the way of strategic thought, usually simply rushing directly towards your gunfire.

Unfortunately, *Combined Assault* does too

little to distinguish itself from other titles in the series. An unfulfilling, if lengthy, single-player experience, combined with average visuals and audio mean that while it's not a bad game, Combined Assault feels very much like a missed opportunity. **NAG**

Adam Liebman

BOTTOM LINE
Uninspired team-based shooter: nothing that hasn't been done before.

64 OUT OF 100

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

AFTER BURNER: BLACK FALCON

RRP→ R451 | **Publisher→** SEGA | **Distributor→** WWE | **Genre→** Arcade

PLANET MOON HAS A reputation for developing funny, interesting and downright zany games that will always bring a smile of fondness when remembered. *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* gave us the infamous "TIIMMMMY!" shout that can still be heard at the edges of any decent LAN party, while *Armed and Dangerous* defined what we consider a Land Shark. *After Burner: Black Falcon* does absolutely nothing.
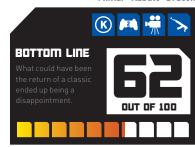
That's not to say *After Burner* is a bad game: when you're right in the thick of it, the nuts and bolts hold together and you have an arcade blast-a-thon that, much like its namesake, is 90% luck and 100% awesome. You pick one of three characters, each with

their own moderately humorous motivations for taking to the sky and blasting the crap out of people. You earn cash with which to buy better planes or upgrade what you own. Beyond that, it quickly becomes a repetitive affair with almost no deviation in the mission structure. There's some *ad hoc* multiplayer score chasing against a buddy, but it's so stale it might as well have been left out.

The main problem with *After Burner: Black Falcon* is that its gameplay remains practically unchanged from the original. Stalwart 'nostalgiaists' [**we know it's not a real word, but it sounds impressive – Ed**] might not mind, but it's been twenty years since the first *After Burner*. A little evolution wouldn't have hurt

the game in any way, and not even the (slightly) funny cut-scenes can save what is essentially an old game in dry-cleaned clothes. **NAG**
Miktar "Kabuto" Dracon

BOTTOM LINE
What could have been the return of a classic ended up being a disappointment.

62 OUT OF 100

MTX: MOTOTRAX

RRP→ R349 | **Publisher→** Activision | **Distributor→** Megarom | **Genre→** Racing

BUT SERIOUSLY, WHO'D WANT one of those pansy, carbon-fibre, asphalt-licking super bikes anyway, when you can jitter along on a 125cc scrambler that sounds like a strangled wasp and shovels gravel by the bucket-load into your face every two seconds? Roll on the dust guzzlers.

MTX: Mototrax plies three main modes: your bog-standard, eat-your-way-to-the-top Career mode; a fully-featured Custom Rider mode for tricking out and tweaking your little biker dude; and the Dirt Wurx USA editor mode for creating your own bitchin' tracks. The Career mode trots out several event types spanning racing (both super cross and motocross), freestyle, and free ride circuits. Racing events pit you

against three opponents on 16 different tracks, and you'll be hard-pressed to beat the sods too, as the AI is villainously crafty and skilled. Freestyle events call for your most dazzlingly coordinated display of more than 100 possible tricks, while free ride zones – resembling nothing so much as areas that tiptoed out of a *Tony Hawk* title – let you rumble about doing your own inimitable thing or completing a range of mini-challenges like pop-a-wheeling around buses or launching your hawg across swamps.

The visuals are really snappy, and the game features a soundtrack of thirty tub-thumpers from The Misfits, Metallica, Slipknot, and more. All told, this is one firecracker of a

game, and at the price comes with a double devil-horns recommendation. **NAG**
Tarryn van der Byl

Ack! Gravity!

BOTTOM LINE
A stylish, engaging and, like, way gnarly little dirt racer.

73 OUT OF 100

PC PS2 PS3 **PSP** XBOX 360 DS Wii GBA MOB

095

It's a bird! It's a plane! No! It's a Hell's Angel!

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTORCYCLES: RACE TO THE RALLY

RRP→ R299 | **Publisher→** Activision Value | **Distributor→** Megarom | **Genre→** Racing | **PC Spec→** 1 **2 3** 4 5

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

NOW DON'T BE FOOLED by those low system specs: turning on a trilinear texture filter or even antialiasing brought the review godbox to its knees. Moreover, it's one colossal downhill drift from here on out.
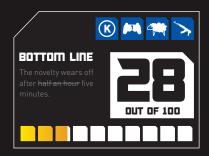
The quick version: It's a dismal fifth-rate *Burnout* clone with bikes and horrid American 80s hair metal.

The slightly longer version: You roll your hawg down interminable stretches of drab highway, and try to rack up as many points as possible with reckless Hell's Angels abandon. Bag big scores by cruising on the wrong side of the road, swerving dangerously close to other vehicles, swiping other riders off their bikes and smearing them all over the tarmac,

and generally being a grumpy menace. And you'll have to do all of this while hurtling helter-skelter for the next checkpoint, because if your time ticks out, you'll have to restart the race from the beginning - even if you missed the very last checkpoint of the race by a nanosecond, and you've been running the same race for fifteen minutes. Even though you were in the lead, and nobody else shimmied through the checkpoint either. Actually, this game should be renamed *Race to the Checkpoint*, because that's really what this steaming cauldron of tripe boils down to.

Oh, and when you've managed to complete the tour mode circuits, you can play them in reverse. You probably wouldn't want to.

Recommended for the terminally masochistic. **NAG**

Tarryn van der Byl

BOTTOM LINE
The novelty wears off after ~~half an hour~~ five minutes.

28
OUT OF 100

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 07

RRP→ R399 | **Publisher→** EA Games | **Distributor→** EA South Africa | **Genre→** Sport

PC
PS2
PS3
PSP
XBOX
360
DS
Wii
GBA
MOB

IF YOU ENJOY WATCHING European football matches on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings while a seemingly inappropriate naff operatic score screams, "This is the Chaaaaampions," then life has a little present for you. The *UEFA Champions League* series is back following a two-year hiatus. And it's not bad – not bad at all.

With some justification, naysayers have argued that the title is simply *FIFA '07* in disguise. This is most obvious in the controls, which, apart from offering quick free kicks or throw-ins, are innovation free compared to its more famous predecessor. However, while not on the level of Konami's *Pro Evo* series, the gameplay is still absorbing and entertains righteously.

Moreover, when it comes to game modes, EA, as usual, delivers with a laden smorgasbord.

Besides the standard Champions League mode a Challenge mode is also on offer asking the player to change history by fulfilling some unlikely objectives. Thankfully, it's not limited to the tournament proper and makes use of domestic competitions and smaller teams. The manager's mode is styled as The Treble and the objective is to win the domestic league, domestic cup and Champions League. It's not perfectly polished, but does bring some welcome relief to on-field action and locks the player into its 'just one more game' grip.

Okay, so the title is more Real Sociedad

than Real Madrid but it, nevertheless, amuses and challenges the player.

And yes, it does include that naff operatic score for you to sing to, to your heart's content. **NAG**

Ryan Kalis

BOTTOM LINE
Nothing truly innovative, but nevertheless an exciting, enjoyable soccer title.

75
OUT OF 100

F.E.A.R. (PS3)

RRP→ R499 | Publisher→ Vivendi Universal
Distributor→ MiDigital | Genre→ Action

AS A MEMBER OF the First Encounter Assault Recon unit, a crack government squad focusing on the paranormal, it's your job to brave both physical and mental hazards as you face some truly weird and horrifying enemies. One such enemy is a little girl who is as freaky and scary as Freddy Krueger ever was. Like the PC and Xbox 360 versions, *F.E.A.R.* is an exceptional game. However, the graphics on the PS3 don't look as crisp as on the other platforms. The multiplayer is as good as always, with two player modes for a single console and the online modes for those who love big battles. *F.E.A.R.* was always a good game, and once again, it is just brilliant being able to bust a few kneecaps and watch the rag doll effects take place. Unfortunately, it's better on the PC and 360.

Justin Slabbert

83 OUT OF 100

WORLD SNOOKER CHAMPIONSHIP 2007 (PS3)

RRP→ R699 | Publisher→ SEGA
Distributor→ WWE | Genre→ Sports

THE LATEST SNOOKER GAME to hit the gaming market has greatly improved since its predecessor. For once, it actually simulates snooker realistically. It is, however, a bit too true to the real thing and can be a bit drab in some areas. *WSC07* offers a wide variety of game modes, including Championship and Career, which you'll probably play the most. In the Career mode, players will get to play against some of the most successful snooker players today, while at the same time work on a very realistic schedule that is based on real-life events. You also get to play regular pool in some modes. *World Snooker Championship 2007* also runs on the average formula of sports games these days: win matches and competitions to increase your stats so that you can spin balls better as well as other tricks. In the end though, *World Snooker Championship 2007* is a game for diehard snooker fanatics due to its level of realism, but otherwise lacks any real gaming experience.

Justin Slabbert

68 OUT OF 100

LUXOR 2 (XBLA)

RRP→ 800 MS Points | Publisher→ Mumbo Jumbo
Distributor→ XB LIVE Arcade | Genre→ Puzzle

HOW MANY OF YOU have played *Zuma*, PopCap's very addictive 'match colours with a turret' game? *Luxor 2* is the same deal, but instead of a centre turret, you launch the spheres from the bottom of the screen. A stream of multi-coloured spheres roll out along a track. You shoot a new sphere into this chain and when three or more identical spheres touch, they blow up. The trick is to destroy all the spheres before the steam hits the end of the track. *Luxor 2* brings along a lot of nifty power-ups, sphere-destroying weapons, unforgiving tracks and the series' trademark Egyptian theme along with it. It's very addictive and perfect if you like this kind of thing.

James Francis

85 OUT OF 100

MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE (PS3)

RRP→ R499 | Publisher→ Activision
Distributor→ Megarom | Genre→ Action

FOLLOWING THE SAME FORMULA as the extremely successful *X-Men Legends* action-RPG titles, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* throws together 25 characters from the Marvel universe, including the likes of Spider-Man, Wolverine, Iron Man, Captain America, Blade, Ghost Rider, and the Fantastic Four, plus next-generation exclusive characters, Moon Knight and Colossus, in a quest to defeat Doctor Doom and the Masters of Evil. At any time, your team consists of four characters of your choice, though a good portion of the roster has to be unlocked while playing through the game. Each superhero has his or her own superpowers, plus basic melee-combat skills. *Ultimate Alliance* is a *bona fide* treat for any Marvel fan, offering a great deal of variety and replay value. Aside from the occasionally lacking visuals and awkward implementation of the SIXAXIS controller, *Ultimate Alliance* is an enjoyable title for any comic book fan.

Adam Liebman

82 OUT OF 100

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES ARCADE (XBLA)

RRP→ 400 MS Points | Publisher→ Midway
Distributor→ XB LIVE Arcade | Genre→ Brawler

THANKS TO THE LIVE service, the trickle of classic games is slowly becoming a flood. One of the latest additions from the vaults to the online service is none other than the original *Ninja Turtles Arcade* title. If you can recall, it involved the complicated plot of the Turtles fighting Shredder and his minions, mainly through saving April and then saving Splinter as both were nabbed by Shredder's foot soldiers. What that means for you is a lot of fighting action as you clear the various stages in familiar *Double Dragon* brawler fashion. Move along the stage and beat up anything that crosses your path. Up to four players can play, each using one of the Turtles. The experience has translated almost flawlessly and the only things we missed were an arcade-style joystick, a machine eating our money and the standard arcade smell of stale cigarettes. Players have infinite credits, but many of the achievements are tied to how well you play - for example, clock a stage without taking damage or defeat a boss without dying. Very nostalgic!

James Francis

85 OUT OF 100

NEED FOR SPEED: CARBON (PS3)

RRP→ R499 | Publisher→ Electronic Arts
Distributor→ EA South Africa | Genre→ Racing

ELECTRONIC ARTS' POPULAR *Need for Speed* series makes its next-generation debut with its latest instalment, *Carbon*. Following on from the storyline of *Most Wanted*, *Carbon* sees you taking to the streets of Palmont city in an attempt to win as much street-racing territory as possible. Changes from the previous iteration include the re-introduction of drift races, a scaled-down emphasis on police chases, the new Autosculpt feature, which allows you to customise and personalise body parts for your vehicle, 'wingman' racers, as well as Canyon races against the boss characters. These two-part races, though frustrating, add a new element of tension to the already frenetic game dynamic. The soundtrack is well rounded, and the visuals are vastly superior to current-generation versions of the game. More than 30 licensed cars and a plethora of unlockable rewards and challenges make this a lengthy arcade-style racing experience that won't disappoint fans of the franchise.

Adam Liebman

76 OUT OF 100

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER (360)

RRP→ R259 | **Publisher→** Ubisoft
Distributor→ Megarom | **Genre→** Action

THIS IS A NO-BRAINER. There are only two reasons why you won't buy this budget release: either you just don't like pretty, action-packed future-army simulations with awesome online support; or you already own *GRAW*. Even if *GRAW 2* marks your first adventure in this special part of Tom Clancy's world, you should really think about getting the original title (even though it was technically the third in the larger series). Being one of the first-gen games, its visuals are lagging behind what the 360 is currently producing, but beyond that, *GRAW* remains a solid and popular game. You are the team leader of a group of hardened and experienced behind-enemy-lines combatants. The 'Ghosts' go into situations where regular, formal and non-clandestine military forces won't venture for fear of politics and other nonsense. Sure, it's a bit hawkish, but what do you expect from Clancy? Besides, who cares when you have all that cool gear.

THQ 3-IN-1 GAME PACK (PC)

RRP→ R399 | **Publisher→** THQ
Distributor→ MiDigital | **Genre→** Racing
PC Spec→ [1] [2] [3] 4 5

THQ HAS BUNDLED THREE of its more coveted racing titles in one neat package. Leading the charge is THQ stalwart series, *MotoGP 3*, while the flawed *MX vs. ATV Unleashed* follows closely behind. The third, though, is on its own track. *Juiced* is arguably one of the best street racing games of recent years, only held back thanks to bugs and perhaps demanding a bit much from a crowd still suckling on *Need for Speed*. Yet, despite that, it's often talked about and *Juiced 2* already has many interested eyes pointed at it. So, even if the other two titles don't tickle your fancy, Juiced makes this package very appealing. However, the other two offerings aren't so shabby either. *MotoGP* promises some good old SBK action, while *MX vs. ATV* should take care of any off-road scrambler madness you may suppress.

STAR WARS EPISODE I RACER (PC)

RRP→ R89 | **Publisher→** LucasArts
Distributor→ Megarom | **Genre→** Racing
PC Spec→ [1] [2] 3 4 5

A BLAST FROM THE PAST! A few years ago, George Lucas annoyed every *Star Wars* fan when he released the much-hyped *Episode I*, starting the prequels to the original trilogy. The consensus? It was so-so, but that pod racing scene was just plain awesome. Funnily enough, the same conclusion seemed to have met the games based on the movie. In fact, after LucasArts' unfortunate and money-hungry flood of *Episode I* games, the studio assured all of us it would in future focus on quality, not quantity. However, back to the past and *Star War Episode I Racer*: one of the coolest futuristic racing titles ever produced. Given its age, you'll be able to crank it up to full power and really enjoy those fast, curving tracks filled with alien pilots intent on you crashing. If only all *Star Wars* games could be this legendary.

SPACE QUEST COLLECTION (PC)

RRP→ R235 | **Publisher→** Sierra
Distributor→ MiDigital | **Genre→** Adventure
PC Spec→ [1] 2 3 4 5

ROGER WILCO IS BACK! On the one hand, you have to frown on companies for hanging onto their past games catalogue at the expense of destroying the very dedicated abandonware scene. On the other, the games are released in handy all-in-one packages, which are perfect for fans who need a hard copy again. They are also excellent for new gamers. Despite its age, the *Space Quest* series remains one of the funniest and fun adventure yarns of our age. This bundle includes all six of the *Space Quest* games as well as a large PDF manual for all those anti-piracy security checks. Even better, it runs without the CD. The earlier games, like *Space Quest*, have been replaced by their VGA counterparts, which use the improved point-and-click interface. In other words, if you fear all the tricky command typing from the original CGA/EGA SQ, that's not necessary.

LEISURE SUIT LARRY COLLECTION (PC)

RRP→ R235 | **Publisher→** Sierra
Distributor→ MiDigital | **Genre→** Adventure
PC Spec→ [1] 2 3 4 5

LARRY'S BACK! YES, JUST like *Space Quest*, we have another Sierra adventure series starring a perpetual loser just barely escaping Darwin's wrath. However, instead of saving the universe, Larry has the more understandable need to get laid... sorry, find true love. Probably the first example of gaming sleaze, *LSL* was a lowbrow, adult-themed game that left a huge legacy in its wake. If you ignore the last *LSL* game, *Magna Cum Laude*, the series has rarely disappointed fans. As with the *Space Quest* collection, the very old games are represented by their VGA remakes. To run these games on Windows XP, you'll have to use DOSBox. So, essentially these companies won't release their old games for free so that abandonware sites can preserve them, but they'll use the open source software we all do to play those games in the first place. A bit of a raw deal, but apart from that, this is a great buy: all five *LSL* games in one package.

GRIM FANDANGO (PC)

RRP→ R89 | **Publisher→** LucasArts
Distributor→ Megarom | **Genre→** Adventure
PC Spec→ [1] 2 3 4 5

THE WORLD IS A cruel and unfair place. If there were any sense of justice out there, Manny and his dead cohorts would have seen a sequel. However, fans were slow to buy it and the world was blind and didn't appreciate the terrific godly adventure game LucasArts had produced. Those who have played it rate *Grim Fandango* very highly, and even the purists didn't cause a big fuss over the abandoning of the mouse for a keyboard-only control scheme. Okay, a mouse would have been nice and we all hoped that that development would take place in the sequel. Alas, no sequel, and all that's left from LucasArts' final release in the adventure genre is this. You play as Manny, a Grim Reaper who has to pay off his debt in order to go to heaven. Unfortunately, the other Reapers always beat him to the best deaths. Then a special case arrives that could mean his salvation. Quite simply one of the adventure games you **must** play at least once.

THIS JUST IN AT THE *NAG* OFFICE

SUPER PAPER MARIO [WII]

IT WAS ACTUALLY A little unsettling to see how much of a series departure *Super Paper Mario* is: gone is the turn-based *Final Fantasy*-like combat system, replaced instead with the rather nostalgic jump-on-things mechanic that made *Super Mario* rather Super. However, is it *Paper Mario*? Well, we're not very far in, but we already have a taste of the whole flip-from-2D-to-3D thing that is the hallmark of the game, and it's delicious. The humour is spot-on so far, and we've already had a few laugh-out-loud moments (especially Bowser's "We're under attack? You guys are such jokers!"). The first half-hour with the game speaks fondly of what is in store for us, and we're very anxious to get our Mario on.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3 [360]

A DECADE AGO, THE IDEA of a strategy game on a console was a much-lamented joke, usually involving the "how do you play it without a mouse" argument. Since then, there have been a lot of attempts at making the genre work on consoles, especially the challenge of getting a traditionally mouse-powered interface to work with a controller. Well, it's finally happened to an extent that you should be paying attention. After trying a few things with the *Lord of the Rings* RTS on the 360, EA has ventured forth and released the promised 360 version of *Command & Conquer 3*. Okay, to answer the question everyone wants to know: a mouse and keyboard will still give you a considerable edge. However, just as a decent third-person game works nearly as well with that configuration as with a controller, the same can be said in reverse for strategy titles. By sticking the cursor in the middle of the screen and instead moving the entire screen when you scroll around, not to mention many refinements in how you select units and buildings, it works very well. So well, in fact, that if you never played the PC version, you won't be any poorer.

OVERLORD [360]

WAIT; DIDN'T WE HAVE this in last month's First Play? Yes, you got us. However, Codemasters sent through a final piece of review code. It's all very confusing. The game, though, never ends to amuse and entertain, and even though we've replayed the first few levels several times thanks to all the build updates, it doesn't get old. In fact, we just want more and the new code finally got us deeper into the awesome world of Overlord. If you missed last month's skinny, Overlord is a Pikmin-style action/strategy game where you take on the role of an evil overlord, risen from the ashes and back to avenge his previous defeat by a group of heroes a long time ago. They have fallen into all kinds of bad habits, which makes you the good guy for a change. Well, as good as evil can be. The peasants took serious issue with our imps ransacking their houses, so we had to kill a few. Now they tremble in fear. How could things possibly get better?

FORZA 2 [360]

THE LONG WAIT IS finally over! There was a wait? As much as Microsoft would like the opposite to be true, *Forza 2* really entered the market with a handicap: *Forza* just wasn't nearly as good as *Gran Turismo* was. Okay, some might say that the two don't compete, but that clearly is someone who hasn't played either, or considers marketing sheets as the truth. Nevertheless, *Forza 2* fills a very important gap: the one *Gran Turismo* fans have created and *PGR* has marginally filled. What the 360 needs is a *tour de force* of top-end car simulation and kitting. *Forza 2* is that, and every car enthusiast who has played it has been charmed by its advanced physics model, great attention to detail and unbelievably fantastic skin editor. No, it's not enough to dethrone the almighty *Gran Tursimo* yet, but it's by far the best competitor yet released to rival Polyphonic's prolific series.

FLATOUT: ULTIMATE CARNAGE [360]

FLATOUT, HOW WE MISSED thee. The original game, despite bugs and hefty system requirements, was buckets of fun. You tore across dirt tracks, slamming into opponents and – notably – dislocating all kinds of debris from the side of the track as you crashed into barriers, fences, signposts, light poles, small buildings and so on. These pieces would thus fly all over the place, creating more of a challenge when you need to navigate that corner again. Hitting half of old MacDonald's wooden perimeter while doing 160km/h around a bend can have dire consequences. *FlatOut 2* didn't carry the same charm, but no one will remember that. *FlatOut: Ultimate Carnage* rocks with bells on. It's now clear that the series demands a powerful platform that can physically enable everything including the kitchen sink, all so that you can hit them at high speeds. It's one incredibly solid game and brings tears to our eyes.

WII SPORTS [WII]

IT'S EASY TO SEE that *Wii Sports* is very much a technology demo that was polished up and bundled with the Wii, on the merits of how much fun it is. We've gone Tennis, Golf, Baseball, Boxing and Bowling at each other, rather drunkenly, and had an absolute blast. Boxing is especially dramatic, with cool slowdown effects when you punch someone in the face. There's even a Fitness mode that has you wiggling your arms frantically in an attempt to lower your Fitness Age until it matches your real age. Our embarrassing Fitness Age ended up being 50, and we promise you we're not 50 years old.

THESE GAMES AND MORE IN NEXT MONTH'S *NAG*

THE DIG

WHEN AN ERRANT LUMP of galactic granite manages to tangle itself in Earth's orbit, threatening a catastrophic impaction with some hapless American city, NASA mobilises a squad of hastily-recruited protagonists for a daring mission. Yes, it sounds like that crappy movie with Bruce Willis, but hang in there - it gets better. These intrepid *ad hoc* cosmonauts are charged with commandeering a shuttle mission to the asteroid, ingeniously dubbed "Attila", where they'll plant a couple of nukes and blow the insolent rock off its collision course. Okay, it still sounds like that rubbish film, so let's cut to the good stuff. When this objective is done and dusted, the crew decides to take a stroll (or hover) around the now somewhat mollified orbital intruder.

After some reckless poking about, mission leader (and player character), Boston Low, manages to transform the otherwise conspicuously inconspicuous boulder into a star ship, and its startled spelunkers are whisked off to a distant, uncharted, and seemingly abandoned planet. Once their heads stop spinning, the stranded crewmates – Low, the sassy linguist/controversial reporter Maggie Robbins, and savant German geologist/archaeologist Ludger Brink – start taking stock of their extraordinary surroundings. As the trio set out to explore this strange new world, somewhat inscrutably named "Cocytus" by Brink (after one of the lesser-known rivers of Hades, the underworld of Greek mythology), the story really begins to unfold. The desolate landscape is littered with the decaying remnants of an obviously sophisticated civilisation, but what has happened to its inhabitants? Determined to find his way home, Low wanders off to somehow accomplish this, while Robbins and (an increasingly unstable) Brink become absorbed with studying the remaining evidence of the mysteriously vanished Cocytans.

Conceived by none other than Hollywood luminary, Steven Spielberg, *The Dig* was originally intended to be an episode of *Amazing Stories*, and later a feature film. Visual effects technology being what is was in those days, however, rendered the production of such an ambitious project prohibitively expensive. A gamer himself, Spielberg then decided it would make a marvellous adventure, and approached LucasArts with the idea. *The Dig* was to become the eleventh and penultimate LucasArts title to use the SCUMM engine, and a sad herald of the end times for classic adventure gaming.

This game was a dramatic departure from LucasArts' regular fare at the time – there was none of the zany slapstick or wildly unlikely situations (apart from the patently obvious) that were staples of previous titles, with very little humour in the dialogue. On the contrary, as Brink slowly and inexorably descends into madness, the game takes on a significantly darker mantle than anyone might have expected from the company that produced *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle*. This, coupled with some exceedingly obscure puzzles – indeed, the game feels like a precursor to *Myst* in many ways – has ensured that *The Dig* has always received a rather mixed bag of reviews.   **NAG**

Rumble! Rumble!

tram

I'm trapped in here?

stone plate

I worry this statue is life-sized.
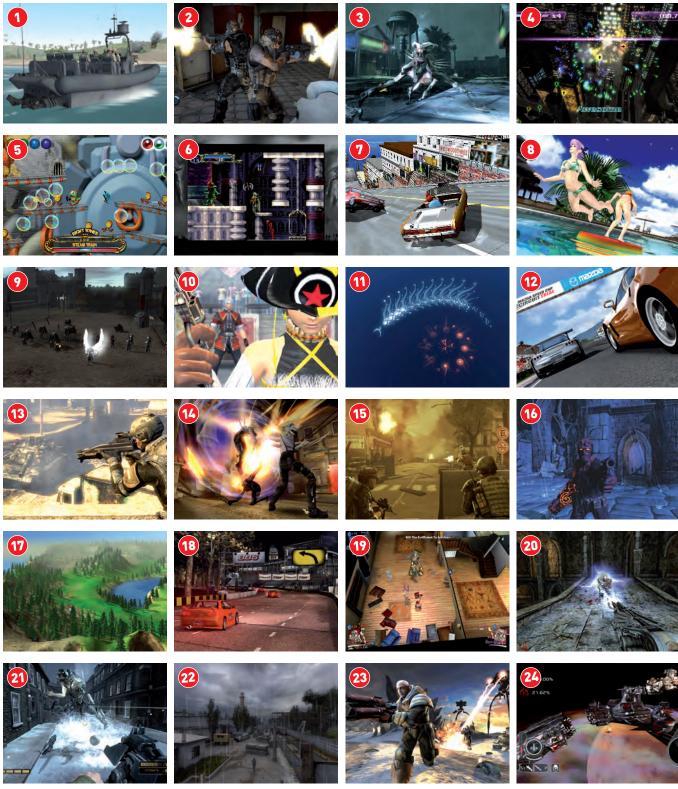
DIG IT!

- Boston Low is voiced by Robert Patrick – better known as "that awesome liquid metal dude in *Terminator 2*". One of Low's responses about his PDA is, "It's the T-1000 model", while elsewhere in the game, he shows Maggie a photograph of their missing crewmate, Brink, and reprises the shape-shifting terminator's famous interrogative, "Have you seen this boy?"

- *The Dig* is notorious for having suffered the longest production cycle of any LucasArts game.

- Originally begun in 1989, it underwent three complete rewrites, as well as changing hands between three different development teams in succession, with the game broaching vapourware status by the time it was finally released in 1995. The first incarnation of the game, billed as a "Science Fiction Role-Playing Adventure" featured a jungle planet, a choice of playable characters, and a curious survival model, where characters had to locate and consume food and water in order to sustain life. The second team tossed these ideas out, redesigned the alien landscape from scratch, and wrote in an additional character: a Japanese investor named Toshi Olema. At this point, the game interface resembled that of contemporary LucasArts titles *Full Throttle* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, with on-screen visual icons representing verbal functions. After much internal squabbling, the third and final iteration scrapped this in favour of the 'single omnipotent click' interface, and discarded the fourth character. Meanwhile, a book (written by sci-fi veteran Alan Dean Foster) and audio book of the game were produced. Somewhere, somehow, someone forgot to memo one of the art departments responsible for the cover illustrations, however, because the cover of the audio book shows four astronauts.

- At Spielberg's request, all early versions of the game featured a fair bit of violence and gore. Following heavy criticism from parental groups in the wake of gruesome dino romper, *Jurassic Park*, however, LucasArts was asked to tone it down a little.

- Earlier this year, LucasArts filed a trademark opposition suit against community bookmarking site Digg, claiming, "THE DIGG mark is confusingly similar in sound, meaning, and appearance to the Opposer's THE DIG mark. The Applicant's registration and use of the DIGG Mark would likely create confusion, mistake, or deception in the minds of prospective purchasers as to the origin or source of the Opposer's Goods associated with THE DIG Mark." That's just a bit silly, actually. We can spell.

NAME THAT GAME

IT'S ANOTHER MONTH OF Name That Game! Try to guess what all the games below are (hint: they're all in the last few issues of NAG), and if you're right you could win fabulous prizes courtesy of Megarom. E-mail the names of all 24 games to nagcomps@tidemedia.co.za, and be sure to include your contact information and postal details. **[Competition closes when the next issue of NAG hits shelves]**

GAME DEVELOPER ALL-ST★RS

So many magical men and women have managed to bend space and time just to create games we can all enjoy. These brave pioneers of the digital divide deserve our love, attention and especially our respect in light of what they have so selflessly done for us. Celebrated in this feature are the extraordinary Game Developer All-Stars - those we felt had gone beyond the call of duty in game development. We also take time to mention the honourable mentions in the Hall of Fame: developers who also deserve our love and affection, but we ran out of space and had to write less about them because there are just so many out there worth mentioning.

WILL WRIGHT

BORN: January 20, 1960

CREATOR OF: Raid on Bungeling Bay, SimCity (but not SimCity 4), SimEarth, SimLife, SimCopter, SimAnt, The Sims (but not The Sims 2), Spore

OCCUPATION:
• Game designer

Wright is known for repeatedly remaking the same game idea of his, but each time from a different angle or perspective. It's easy to see how *Spore* is practically what *SimEarth* tried to be, but couldn't at the time due to a lack of hardware power. He tries to inspire other developers to take risks in game creation. He's currently working on the highly anticipated *Spore*.

EARLY LIFE: At ten, he built a balsa wood scale model of the USS Enterprise's flight deck. Built many models, and had ambitions of being an astronaut. Graduated at 16 and pursued various degrees at Louisiana Tech: mechanical engineering, architecture, computers and robotics. Wrote his first game, *Raid on Bungeling Bay*, for the Commodore 64 in 1984. He was given the 'Lifetime Achievement Award' at the Game Developers Choice award in 2001.

TRIVIA: He collects leftovers from the Soviet space programme, including a 100-pound hatch from a space shuttle, a seat from a Soyuz, control panels from the Mir space station, as well as dolls, dice and fossils. Used to build BattleBots with his daughter. "We built these robots and we took them down to Berkeley and studied the interactions that people had with the robots," says Wright. "We built this newer one that had a rapid-fire ping pong cannon. It would fire about ten per second. So we gave people this plastic bat and we said, 'It's set up to play baseball. Do you want to play baseball? It's going to shoot a little ball and you try to hit it.' And all of a sudden it's like da-da-da-da, and it's belting them with balls."

HIDEO KOJIMA

BORN: August 24, 1963

CREATOR OF: Metal Gear, Snatcher, Policenauts

OCCUPATION:
- Former vice president of Konami Computer Entertainment Japan
- Head of Kojima Productions

Kojima's trademark style is to address and approach a multitude of important, large issues and aspects of human life in a philosophical, verbose fashion. Considered one of the few post-modern game designers, he loves movies and pays homage through his stories and characters, often to the point of pastiche (serious imitation). Known for his quirky humour and disarming plot twists, Kojima still develops and is working on *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

EARLY LIFE: Originally, he wanted to be a film director, but joined up with Konami's MSX home computer division in 1986 as a designer. The first game he worked on was *Penguin Adventure*, but the first game he developed was *Lost World* in 1986, a war-themed platform game starring a masked female wrestler. Konami cancelled it before release.

TRIVIA: He has his own blog (translated into English at http://www.blog.konami.jp/gs/hideoblog_e/) and likes to buy leather jackets.

PETER MOLYNEUX

BORN: November 30, 1960

CREATOR OF: Entrepreneur, Populous, Powermonger, Dungeon Keeper, Black & White

OCCUPATION:
- Founder of Bullfrog
- Head of Lionhead Studios

Lauded as one of the world's most brilliant and inventive game developers, Molyneux has a reputation for being over-enthusiastic about his games under development. He's moved from being a designer and developer to being more of a publicist and executive producer. He's not the principle designer of *Fable*, *The Movies* or *Black and White 2*, but he often lends his name to projects to give them more credibility. He hasn't done his own development in a while, but continues to fight incredible battles to get game development studios in the UK treated the same as the UK record studios. His efforts haven't gone unrewarded, and recently the British government agreed to give game development studios the same kind of tax breaks record studios had been getting. Go Molyneux!

EARLY LIFE: He began his career in 1982 by distributing and selling floppy disks, which contained videogames for Atari and the Commodore 64. He founded his own development studio, Tauras, in 1982 to do so, but started working independently in 1984. His first game was *Entrepreneur*, which was about managing money and starting a business. The game only sold two copies - his mom bought one. He founded Bullfrog in 1987.

TRIVIA: He appeared as himself in *Game over - Spiel ohne Grenzen*, a TV documentary about gaming that aired in Germany in 2005.

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

BORN: November 16, 1952

CREATOR OF: Mario, Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda, Star Fox, Wave Race, Pikmin

OCCUPATION:
- Senior Marketing Director, Nintendo
- General Manager, Nintendo Entertainment Analysis and Development

Often called the father of modern videogaming, Miyamoto specialises in refined control mechanics and imaginative worlds. Employed by Nintendo in 1980 (which created card games at the time), Miyamoto had to design one of their first coin-op arcade games. This resulted in *Donkey Kong*. Miyamoto remains involved in future Nintendo products, including the elusive *Mario 128*.

EARLY LIFE: As a young boy, he loved to paint, draw and explore the landscape around his home. In 1970, he enrolled at Kanazawa College of Art and graduated five years later. In 1977, armed with a degree in industrial design, he arranged a meeting with Hiroshi Yamauchi, head of Nintendo of Japan. He got a job as a staff artist.

TRIVIA: He's ambidextrous, just like his creations Mario and Link. He plays the guitar and banjo. He didn't die in 2002 from heart problems - that was just a rumour. Likes gardening.

JOHN ROMERO & JOHN CARMACK

BORN: October 28, 1967 / August 20, 1970

CREATORS OF: Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Quake

OCCUPATION:
- Co-founder of id Software, Founder of Slipgate Ironworks /
- Co-founder of id Software, Technical Director at id Software
- Founder of Armadillo Aerospace

Romero and Carmack were once the dynamic duo of the gaming industry and truly more than the sum of their individual parts. Romero had unique designs and development tools, and when partnered with the revolutionary programming of John Carmack, the two could do no wrong. Romero went on to become Chairman of the Cyberathlete Professional League in 1998, and coined the term "deathmatch." Romero is still busy developing games, but Carmack has expressed that he's moving on to aerospace instead.

EARLY LIFE: Carmack, the son of a local television news reporter, grew up in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area and once broke into his school at night to steal computers from the lab. He pioneered binary space partitioning (which *Doom* was the first game to use) as well as surface caching and Carmack's Reverse. Carmack and Romero met each other at *Softdisk G-S*, a publication that each month released a disk with software for the Apple II on it. While still at *Softdisk G-S*, Carmack, Romero and others (such as Tom Hall) created the first *Commander Keen* games, which were published by Apogee Software under the shareware distribution model in 1991.

TRIVIA: Romero's first game, *Scout Search*, was published in 1984 by *inCider* magazine. Romero passed up the chance to join start-up company Blue Sky Productions back in 1987, which later became Looking Glass Technologies (which would later close as a direct result of Romero - Eidos had to choose between funding Looking Glass Technologies or Romero's game *Daikatana* and his company Ion Storm).

SID MEIER

BORN: 1954

CREATOR OF: Civilization, Alpha Centauri, Colonization, Railroad Tycoon, Antietam, SimGolf, F-15 Strike Eagle

OCCUPATION:
- Game designer

Renowned for his contribution to gaming in the form of *Civilization*, Sidney K. Meier is an American programmer and creator of some of the most successful series of all time. He's been afforded accolades for both his contributions to the industry and for titles that have broken the books commercially. It would not be hyperbole to call him one of the legends of the computer game industry. In 1999, Meier became the second person to be inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Hall of Fame (the first being Shigeru Miyamoto). These days Meier mostly serves as a creative director within Firaxis, working on multiple projects at the same time.

EARLY LIFE: Founded MicroProse with Bill Stealey in 1982, Meier then developed the game series that propelled him to fame: *Civilization*. Eventually Meier left MicroProse and in 1996 founded Firaxis Games along with Jeff Briggs, a veteran gaming executive who had also worked at MicroProse as a Designer. Early 1999 saw the release of *Alpha Centauri*, which won several awards, while its expansion, *Alien Crossfire*, was voted 'Best Expansion Pack of the Year' in 1999 by several industry magazines.

TRIVIA: Most of Sid Meier's acclaimed games were inspired by board games, designed by Francis Tresham of Hartland Trefoil Ltd. He met his wife at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cockeysville, where both were singers in the choir.

KEN SILVERMAN

BORN: November 1, 1975

CREATOR OF: Ken's Labyrinth

OCCUPATION:
- Full-time recreational programmer

His young age and the Build engine get him into the All-Star league, the Build engine still wholly regarded as the last true 'raycast' (the process that powers the engine, pioneered by John Carmack for *Wolfenstein 3D*) engine evolution and the last major engine advancement before the inexorable tide of hardware acceleration. The Build engine was used for *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Shadow Warrior* and *Blood*. Ken was even once considered the primary rival of John Carmack. Other games that involved Ken are *Rise of the Triad*, *William Shatner's TekWar* and *Redneck Rampage*.

EARLY LIFE: Born at midnight on Halloween in 1975, Ken got his first computer at eight in 1983 (a TI-99/4A). He developed several games while young, and in 1993, he signed a contract with Apogee to develop a new engine for them, the Build engine. He tried to work for Apogee at the same time as his first year at college, but after the first semester his grades were so bad his dad told him to quit college and go work full-time for Apogee. He worked for three years on the Build engine, and then returned to college (while still young, according to him).

TRIVIA: Ken's favourite food is fish, and he admitted that he actually doesn't know why the Build engine works, except that it does.

HALL OF FAME

CHRIS SAWYER:
Scottish game developer responsible for some of the best-known and much-loved Tycoon games such as *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and *Transport Tycoon*. He entered the games industry in 1983 and initially worked mostly on PC conversions of Amiga games, such as *Elite* and *Virus*. In 1994, his first management simulation game, *Transport Tycoon*, propelled him to developer fame hood. Most unusual is how insular Sawyer is: his early games were developed entirely by him and with the help of one artist and one musician. Sawyer still develops games, and recently released *Locomotion*.

AL LOWE:
Born July 24, 1942, he taught music at public school for 15 years, and then taught himself programming. In 1982, he released three games (*Dragon's Keep*, *Bop-A-Bet*, and *Troll's Tale*) for the Apple II. Sierra Entertainment bought them in 1983 and Al worked for them as a programmer and game designer for 16 years. He was lead programmer on *King's Quest III* and *Police Quest I*, and even created music for other Sierra games. Most people know Al for his *Leisure Suit Larry* series. Lowe no longer develops games.

ROBERTA WILLIAMS:
Still regarded as arguably the most well-known computer game designer and influential female gamer of her time, Roberta Williams (born February 16, 1953) and her husband Ken Williams were instrumental in the development of graphical adventure games. They founded On-Line Systems, which later became Sierra On-Line, and went on to release the entire *King's Quest* series. She recently admitted that her favourite game she created was *Phantasmagoria*. Roberta

has mentioned she no longer has an interest in developing games.

RICHARD GARRIOTT:
Born July 4, 1961, and nicknamed Lord British, Garriott single-handedly created what are still considered the true classics of gaming. He produced his first published game, *Akalabeth*, in 1980. In the early 1980s, he created the *Ultima* series of games, and by the third one, it had such a large following that he (along with his brother, father and others) founded Origin Systems, their own videogame publisher. Origin went on to become one of the most influential game developers in videogame history. Garriott is still developing.

NOLAN BUSHNELL:
Born February 5, 1943, Nolan Bushnell founded both Atari and the Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza-Time Theaters chain. He is listed in *Newsweek*'s "50 Men That Changed America," and has started more than twenty companies. He is still recognised as one of the founding fathers of the videogame industry. Nolan essentially created *Pong* when trying to fix the Magnavox tennis game. Bushnell no longer developers games.

JEFF MINTER:
Born April 22, 1962, Jeff 'Yak' Minter is probably the most distinctive developer in recent years. His games include certain elements with a fondness for llamas, sheep, camels, etc. His first game, *Andes Attack*, was a *Defend* clone for the Commodore VIC-20, but with llamas instead of spaceships. His second game, *Gridrunner*, was written in a week and was his first commercial success. Minter is still developing and is currently working on an Xbox LIVE Arcade title that

looks a lot like one of his classics, *Tempest*.

DAVE PERRY:
Born 1967, Northern Irish game developer, Dave Perry, has created dozens of loved games including *Earthworm Jim*, *MDK*, and *Messiah*, and (not so loved) *Enter the Matrix*. He founded Shiny Entertainment and the company created games for many internationally known brands such as Disney, 7 Up, McDonalds, Orion Pictures and Warner Bros. He recently announced the first gamer-developer MMO where the person that helps the most will be given a fully-funded MMO to direct (http://topsecret.acclaim.com/).

BILL ROPER:
Well known throughout the gaming industry for over 13 years, Roper has served as vice president of Blizzard North and was a Director of Blizzard Entertainment. He worked directly on various games and played a key role in the success of *Warcraft*, *StarCraft* and *Diablo*. He recently left Blizzard Entertainment and co-founded Flagship Studios, of which he is CEO. There, he is working on *Hellgate: London* (which by all accounts could be called *Diablo 3*). He even sings baritone and tenor with a Renaissance Fair group.

DAVID BRABEN:
Best known for co-writing *Elite* (the popular and influential space trading game that inspired the likes of *Freelancer*), Braben also developed *Zarch* (which was later released as *Virus* and is still considered to be the first 'solid' 3D game of all time). He has recently worked on various games based on the *Wallace & Gromit* franchise, and is currently working on a game called *The Outsider*. **NAG**

MSI GETS INTO THE GAMING LAPTOP GROOVE

MSI ANNOUNCED A NEW line of gaming laptops at Computex in Taiwan. Dubbed the GX series, they should be easy to spot by their black colouring with orange flames. Four models have been announced so far: the 600, 610, 700, and the 710. The 600s are 15-inch screen models, and the 700s have 17-inch screens. The second digit in the product names denotes Intel (00) or AMD (10). The really special one is the 600, which features an Intel Merom CPU on a P965 chipset. There's a button on this laptop to change clock speed from 2.0GHz to 2.4GHz - a nice 20% overclock without any hassles.

If that's not enough to satisfy your gaming laptop needs, MSI showed off its first Luxium product. This is its answer to ASUS's XG Station, which connects a laptop to an external graphics card. The MSI product is quite a bit bigger, almost the size of a small printer. However, this means it should have an easier time fitting some larger PCI Express cards, and it also includes an Ethernet port, two USB ports, and a 7.1-channel soundcard. It accepts both optical and coaxial SPDIF in and has 7.1-channel analogue and coaxial SPDIF out. It connects to an ExpressCard, which will likely be the best bet for high-speed data transfer until external PCI Express connectors appear.

Other interesting products include a dual Radeon HD 2600 XT on a single PCB, with internal CrossFire connectors. This should pave the way for interesting quad-CrossFire setups later this year.

AMD PARTNERS SHOW BARCELONA

AN UNNAMED VENDOR AT Computex 2007 showed AMD's upcoming Barcelona quad-core CPU in operation. The CPU, however, was operating at 1.6GHz - a far cry from the promised 2.6GHz clock speed shown in road maps. According to some, the current Barcelona samples are not scaling core frequencies well, which seems to echo partners saying that the most stable unit they've received was only at 2.0GHz. The latest roadmaps show that Barcelona CPUs will first ship as Opteron processors in July, despite the partners claiming that the processor isn't performing well enough for a July launch. Consumer chips are only likely to be around from the end of the year. On a more positive note, IBM has unveiled its 4.7GHz dual-core Power 6 processor. The chip features an impressive 8MB of cache and a processor bandwidth of 300Gbps. IBM claims that while the new processor is twice as fast as the Power 5, it uses nearly the same amount of electricity. Mainly targeted at the server market, the Power 6 will be shown off in the System p570 server, where it is said to be performing extremely well. No pricing was made available by the company, but it's likely to be expensive.

SHARP BOASTS WORLD'S SMALLEST BLUE LASER

SHARP HAS UNVEILED THE world's smallest blue laser diode. It measures 3.3mm in diameter and is expected to cost ¥12,000 ($99) in sample quantities, and lower once bulk production hits stride. Sharp has spent several billion yen to build a dedicated line for the diodes at its Mihara factory in Hiroshima. The line is expected to produce up to 500,000 units per month by September. This should help reduce the shortage of blue lasers for both Blu-ray and HD DVD drives, a shortage that has been keeping player costs high for most of the year.

In addition, the compact size and low (10mW) power use will make notebook Blu-ray and HD DVD drives much more feasible. Sharp is expected to use the new laser in its own products first, but industry-wide shortages may see some of them being sold off to traditional competitors at a premium.

SIS TO INTRODUCE NEW INTEL CHIPS

AFTER A LONG ABSENCE, SIS plans to release a new family of chips for the upcoming Intel Penryn dual- and quad-core processors in the coming year. These chips are to be called the 680 series, oddly similar to NVIDIA's 680 chipset, also for the Intel platform. The high-performance chipset in the new SIS line-up will be the 680SCD, which supports a 1,333MHz FSB Penryn processor, DDR2 800 and 1,066MHz support. This single chip design features only a single PCI-E 16x slot, four PCI-E 1x slots, ten USB 2.0 ports, four SATA 3.0Gb/sec ports and a single Gigabit Ethernet controller.

The other chipsets that SIS will introduce are the 680SCE and 680SCH. The SCE supports a 1,333MHz FSB, while the SCH will be limited to the current 1,066MHz. Most notably, however, is the introduction of SIS's first DirectX 10-compliant part in the form of the Mirage4 graphics core, which features full HDCP and hardware acceleration for H.264 and VC-1 compression schemes.

Bottom of the range in this line-up will be a single chip configuration in the form of the 680SCP and 680SCL. The two chips are identical with the exception of FSB support: the 680SCP supports a 1,333MHz FSB, while the 680SCL is limited to 1,066MHz. Neither chip will support HDCP or HDMI.
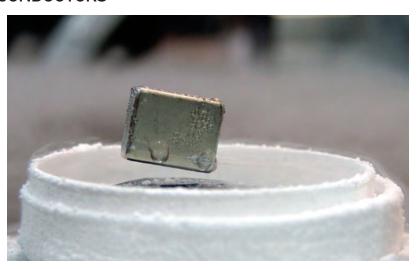
TURNING UP THE HEAT ON SUPERCONDUCTORS

RESEARCHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY of Toronto think they may have cracked one of the most anticipated discoveries of the next century: high-temperature superconductors. Using newly-developed instruments that can scan matter at sub-atomic levels, they were able to generate an image of the behaviour of electrons in an yttrium barium copper oxide crystalline superconductor for the first time. The results of the experiment were published in Nature. While the secret of how to create a room-temperature superconductor has not yet been found, understanding the basic mechanics of how the phenomenon occurs is a major step toward developing newer materials with higher superconducting temperatures.

The potential applications are numerous. Magnetic levitation trains and possibly other vehicles could become cost effective, reducing transit times and shipping costs by lowering energy consumption. Efficiency improvements in power generation and transmission could also potentially lower fossil fuel consumption and reduce waste heat. Other fields such as computing, specifically quantum computing, will likely also benefit greatly from advanced superconducting materials. Expensive medical devices like MRI scanners could be shrunk to portable sizes, and made cheap enough for widespread use, displacing more harmful and less accurate x-ray machines.

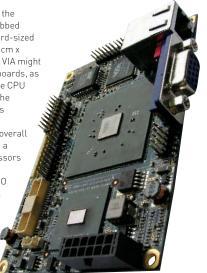While the breakthrough has not yet yielded any new materials for potential products, it's now speculated that researchers are on track to develop a room-temperature superconductor within ten years.

VIA UNVEILS WORLD'S SMALLEST MOTHERBOARD

VIA CEO, WENCHI CHEN, recently unveiled the company's smallest motherboard, dubbed the Mobile ITX platform. The business card-sized motherboard measures an incredible 7.5cm x 4.5cm. He went on to state that over time VIA might be able to produce even smaller motherboards, as the integration of components such as the CPU and chipset in one package would allow the conservation of space, making the boards even smaller. VIA, while still in the CPU manufacturing business, is a far third in overall market share behind AMD, but has found a niche in the market for low-power processors designed for mobile devices. Samsung, Hewlett-Packard and others, such as OQO with its model 02 ultra-mobile computer, which is said to be the smallest Windows Vista computer on the market, have embraced VIA's mobile chips. Other VIA mobile devices, such as the Nanobook reference designs, have been announced, one of which is the Gigabyte U60, which is selling at a rapid rate in the Taiwanese market.

HARDWARE SCORING SYSTEM

OUR HARDWARE SCORING SYSTEM is based on the reviewer's expert opinion. The scale is from 1 to 5 with no fractional values. Each number has a specific meaning, described below. Most products will score 3 or 4, with the occasional 5 or 2, and almost never 1. Note that a high price alone can never lower a score below 3.

5 The stuff of Legends. Buy it while you can, I probably already have.

4 A good deal; worth it if you're shopping for one.

3 About what you'd expect, no problems. You might want to wait for it to go on sale.

2 This has some issues. You should probably shop around for something else if possible.

1 The stuff of Nightmares. You'll probably be sorry you got one, even if it was free.

VISTA VS.XP: WINDOWS SHOWDOWN

IT'S BEEN A GOOD six months since Vista was released to the public. The performance promised by Vista has been almost nonexistent, as statistics from various benchmarks and game results seem to indicate that Vista is not as capable as XP, or at least that the drivers are just not as advanced as they should be.

With that, we gathered seven games and tested them on different settings in an effort to gauge whether Vista is faster than XP, as claimed by Microsoft and the IHVs, or if the people (gamers and enthusiasts) are correct and that Vista is still not up to the levels of XP. Before we delve into the performance figures and the graphs we must be clear what it is exactly we are looking for or looking to find.

The graphs here are not a representation of DirectX 10, its performance or function. This is simply because all the games here and the benchmarks make use of DX9Ex (formerly known as DX9L), which is the DX9.0c version of Vista in essence. However, there are differences between DX9.0c native to Windows XP and DX9Ex for Vista. These are concerned with the driver model and how graphics resources are used in Vista as opposed to in XP. To handle the changes introduced by Vista, DX9 itself was modified in such a way as to work as efficiently in Vista as it does in XP. That resulted in DX9Ex, which we are making use of in these benchmarks.

With each driver release version for Vista, performance and compatibility increase in games that were targeted at Windows XP (which is most of them). With that said, it's important to note that although we tried to match drivers in XP and Vista, XP driver development is vastly different to that of XP, and as such, it makes it very difficult to isolate the various parts of the operating systems and pit them against each other. In fact, it's virtually impossible because the environments are vastly different. Having said that, it's important that we investigate the performance benefits (if any) and pitfalls that Vista brings with it. Games behave differently on the two operating systems for different reasons. With each graph printed here, we'll attempt to analyse the results where possible and hopefully reach a meaningful conclusion as to why the results are different.

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory v1.05

	1280x1024 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF	2048x1536 x16F
Vista	132	100	86	67
XP	112	84	75	56

One thing that we did note in ShaderMark 2.1 is that despite the different levels of optimisation in the drivers for XP and Vista, as a platform Vista is much faster in the mathematically intensive tests (in particular, HDR performance). The performance differences in these tests, particularly in Shader 22 to Shader 24 (which are HDR tests ranging from low-quality HDR implementation without filtering to high quality with floating-point filtering), which if you remember, was the cause for many games not being able to support AA and HDR at the same time. From the results gathered, you can see that Vista is more than 100fps faster, which is massive as Vista delivers around one and a half times the performance of XP. Why this test is significant is that ShaderMark is just like the others running under DX9Ex, so the performance benefit to be had if the same shaders were compiled natively for the DX10 environment would be even larger.

This test, however, is isolated and the limiting factor of game performance isn't always the mathematical complexity of the engine, but could be anything from low compression, large textures, and excessive numbers of textures, or simply high polygon counts with high depth complexity. In such situations (see *Far Cry* results), the performance deficit of Vista is most likely purely driver related. However, as stated earlier, there's no possible way to compare equivalent driver releases between the two environments.

What is certain about XP is that the drivers are highly optimised and have likely reached a level where the operating system and/or the API hinder performance. This is easy to see because multi-GPU scaling in DirectX is hardly what one would consider ideal, particularly with Quad SLI where the performance is worse than with regular SLI configurations. However, this isn't the case where OpenGL titles are concerned. (Note that it doesn't imply a linear performance gain with every GPU/board added to the configuration.) What shouldn't be forgotten is that Windows XP has had almost seven years to reach the performance level it has. The way DirectX is structured under XP afford IHVs the opportunity to build upon years of experience working within the same operating system with an API that largely behaves the same way. Therefore, extracting performance from XP is a less cumbersome affair than it is in Vista. That will soon change given enough time. The rate of improvement in the driver quality of Vista is far better than that of XP. Granted, graphics cards have improved as well, but to arrive at the level of driver quality that Vista has with ForceWare 141.xx going forward (158 and 165 as well) took many years to reach under XP.

With that said, with the titles we are playing and will be playing in the immediate future, here is what it looks like: As you'll see in the graphs, XP still has the slight advantage if you average the game results including the OpenGL games, which are purely due to a less than optimal ICD. Looking only at DirectX games, the operating systems exchange blows at various settings and within the games. Since it's close, one has to decide for oneself which is the better gaming operating system. What to bear in mind with Vista is that drivers will continue to improve at a faster rate than the XP drivers do. This can be seen as an advantage to Vista or XP depending on how you look at it, but there's no doubt that a time will come when Vista is significantly faster than XP - much like XP was faster than 98 eventually.

SPLINTER CELL
This title is getting a little long in the tooth, but it supports FP16 (64-bit) HDR rendering and offset mapping for simulating relief information on rocks and other world objects. As these features work on the texture level, they are highly mathematical features and any graphics card that is particularly strong in math calculations should excel in this game. In any event, this is a clear victory for Vista and it develops a significant lead right from the start. These results seem to match the ShaderMark numbers that were recorded earlier, where Vista was significantly faster than XP. *Splinter Cell*'s an old title, but one that is still fun. Therefore, if you plan to replay this or play this for the first time, Vista is the operating system you want to use.
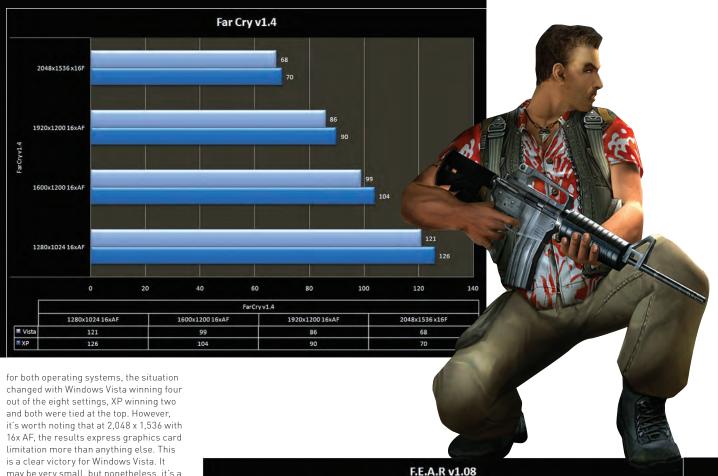
COMPANY OF HEROES
Initially, when looking at these numbers, it appears that Windows Vista is inferior to XP. However, with a driver update and patch

Company Of Heroes

	1280x1024 x16AF	1280x1024 16xAF 4xAA	1600x1200 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF 4xAA	1920x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF 4xAA	2048x1536 16xAF	2048x1536 16xAF 4xAA
Vista	126	83	96	54	76	41	65	37
XP	122	81	93	57	73	43	65	37

Far Cry v1.4

	FarCry v1.4			
	1280x1024 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF	2048x1536 x16F
■ Vista	121	99	86	68
■ XP	126	104	90	70

for both operating systems, the situation changed with Windows Vista winning four out of the eight settings, XP winning two and both were tied at the top. However, it's worth noting that at 2,048 x 1,536 with 16x AF, the results express graphics card limitation more than anything else. This is a clear victory for Windows Vista. It may be very small, but nonetheless, it's a victory. Nevertheless, we wouldn't change to Windows Vista based on the numbers in *Company of Heroes* only. The difference in performance between the two operating systems as driver releases surface for both is likely to increase, and we may find that four or five driver revisions from now, either XP or Vista will have the lead, even at 2,048 x 1,536. Despite not featuring any form of HDR, this game is incredibly taxing and that is evident in the sub-100fps results at 1,280 x 1,024. Whichever operating system you may happen to be using, keep in mind that moving from one to the other at this point will yield no tangible advantage.

FAR CRY
It never seizes to amaze how this title has scaled over the years. Being the oldest game here by at least a year, it was the first to support HDR rendering. While not a tick box feature like in the other games, it also makes use of FP16 textures for HDR, and unlike the others, you can get AA and HDR working with certain graphics cards. However, because of the drivers used at the time of testing, it wasn't possible to select HDR and AA at the same time. Having to choose, HDR will always generate a better image than AA. It also means that the performance hit with HDR will vary depending on the graphics card. On a fill-rate bound or low fill-rate graphics card, AA may not even be a viable option, but HDR might be - for example, in the latest DX10 mid-range cards. This game resulted in an outright win for XP, and at no point could Vista catch up. It may be a few frames faster, but it's faster and consistently so. As the CryENGINE will be used in the upcoming *Far Cry 2*, but vastly improved, it's safe to

F.E.A.R v1.08

	F.E.A.R							
	1280x1024 16xAF	1280x1024 16xAF 4xAA	1600x1200 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF 4xAA	1920x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF 4xAA	2048x1536 x16F	2048x1536 x16F 4xAA
■ Vista	172	101	132	74	117	57	91	35
■ XP	163	96	128	73	114	63	88	44

assume that it will have DX10 extensions at some point. When that finally happens, the results may reflect a different story. Until that happens though, this game is best played on Windows XP.
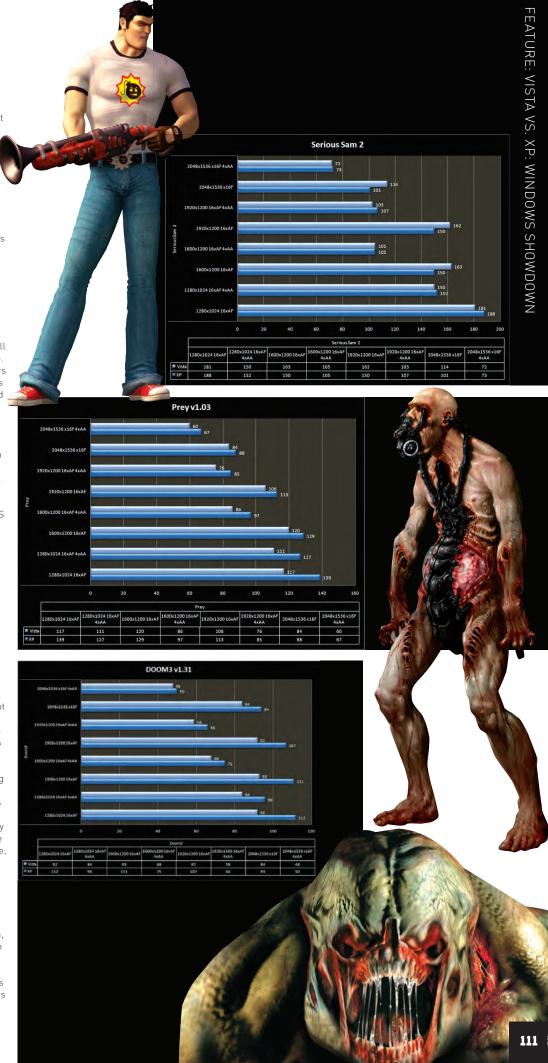
F.E.A.R.

This was arguably the most demanding game around until *Oblivion* (absent from testing) made its appearance. This game doesn't feature any HDR rendering, but has a very advanced particle effects system along with high-resolution textures and an impressive polygon count (particularly for the NPCs). In scenes where there are heavy gunfire and smoke everywhere, the framerate can slow to a crawl, and it's not unusual to have it halved. Therefore, it's best to always keep above the 50fps mark to ensure that such situations (and they will be there) won't make the game unplayable. This game makes use of heavy DX9 shaders for its various effects, and as such, it leans towards being more mathematically bound than texture performance heavy. The results speak for themselves, and Vista is the operating system to beat. Due to a driver anomaly at two particular settings, XP pulled ahead as it continued to function and scale like it should. In Vista, however, the framerate became really poor and this resulted in its loss in these two particular settings. Still, for those who don't play at the two specific resolutions, Vista is the OS on which you want to be playing *F.E.A.R.* according to these numbers.

SERIOUS SAM 2

Serious Sam 2 was one game that displayed very questionable results. No matter how many times the tests were conducted, the results obtained at 1,600 x 1,200 and 1,920 x 1,200 were exactly the same. In any case, Vista had superior framerates at these two settings, and also at 2,048 x 1,536. Not counting these situations, XP is still the choice operating system for this game. Driver quality is definitely at play here, more than the different environments. The results are not consistent with our theory on HDR, or any other game for that matter. As such, these results are open to various interpretations depending on which operating system you lean towards. The large play areas could lead themselves to heavy texture swapping and multiple texture layers, which we can only assume are the most taxing elements of this engine - more so than the HDR effects, which don't have an effect on every world object. At any rate, these results are not as clear as those from *Splinter Cell* are, and we'll call this a tie.

PREY AND DOOM 3

These games are squarely reliant on the OpenGL ICD and its particular version on the operating system. As the new driver model in Vista or any other change in Vista, as compared to XP, not directly affects it in any way, these results can be considered whichever way depending on which operating system you choose to play on. As it stands though, Windows XP currently has a better ICD than Vista.   **NAG**

Serious Sam 2

	1280x1024 16xAF	1280x1024 16xAF 4xAA	1600x1200 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF 4xAA	1920x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF 4xAA	2048x1536 x16F	2048x1536 x16F 4xAA
Vista	181	150	163	105	162	103	114	72
XP	188	152	150	105	150	107	101	73

Prey v1.03

	1280x1024 16xAF	1280x1024 16xAF 4xAA	1600x1200 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF 4xAA	1920x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF 4xAA	2048x1536 x16F	2048x1536 x16F 4xAA
Vista	117	111	120	86	106	76	84	60
XP	139	127	129	97	113	85	88	67

DOOM3 v1.31

	1280x1024 16xAF	1280x1024 16xAF 4xAA	1600x1200 16xAF	1600x1200 16xAF 4xAA	1920x1200 16xAF	1920x1200 16xAF 4xAA	2048x1536 x16F	2048x1536 x16F 4xAA
Vista	92	84	93	68	92	59	84	48
XP	112	96	111	75	107	66	94	50

GROUND ZERO
by Toby Hudon

COLOUR BY NUMBERS

THIS MONTH, I'M IN the US as I write this. Like most times I come visit, there are usually a couple of small (sub-suitcase sized) things I want to grab while I'm here and bring back. So I've been ordering stuff from Newegg.com and other sites and this eventually led to a comparison of the experience back in SA.

Currently, in the US you can order just about any part you want from hundreds of companies eager to take your money and ship it to you as fast as you're willing to pay. Back in SA, there are a couple of sites both big and small that also do something like this. However, often they have problems with things like knowing what items are in stock, updating that information, maintaining reasonable prices, getting it shipped to you, etc. However, the most significant difference is that pretty much any company advertising in a gaming magazine in the US has a Website you can buy their products from, or at worst find a list of places to buy them from.

Back in SA, things are different. Virtually all the ads you see in this magazine are from 'distributors'. That is, they bring parts in from overseas and then sell them on to other companies. Most of them refuse to sell directly to individual people. That's right, you can walk up with a wad of cash and they won't take it. They only sell to 'resellers', who then, in theory, are little computer shops on the side of the road who actually build entire PCs to sell to the screwdriver-less masses. That's the theory, but far from the reality. How do you become a reseller so you can actually buy parts? Usually it involves filling out a form and paying a fee. It varies in each case. However, it's essentially becoming a joke. I guarantee that the majority of 'resellers' are just people fed up dealing with clueless shop owners trying to sell them a Pentium III that's been on the shelf for nine years for R5,000.

The US situation was similar to this long ago. The first x86 PC I dealt with was a 12MHz Compaq 286 that was bought from a 'consulting firm' for $7,000. You didn't just walk into a store and buy a computer in 1986, and building your own was unheard of. Then around 1990, things started to change, and 'upgrade' became a buzzword. I used to deal with US distributors and drop shipped things around the country and bought a 1.7GB Micropolis Fast SCSI-2 HDD for $900 and 16MB of EDO for $640 at 'dealer price' in 1993. I also spent some time in 94/95 working at a storefront computer shop, sitting on a cardboard box in a suit and tie because they couldn't afford another chair, since the world was changing. Their mark-up gradually went from around 25% in 1990 to about 10% in 1995, and then they closed down because they couldn't compete.

In the '90s, large companies like Dell, Gateway 2000, and Packard Bell appeared and started selling computers directly to people instead of through 'consultants' or 'resellers'. The old-school companies like Compaq, IBM, and HP saw the way the wind was blowing and joined in for the most part. At the same time the Web exploded, plug-and-play actually became 'play' and not 'pray', and suddenly everyone wanted to build their own computers and upgrade. Even Intel saw the light and released their 'overdrive' CPUs designed for end-user upgrading. Local computer shops withered away and were replaced by giant superstores, which then also withered away against the onslaught of the Web.
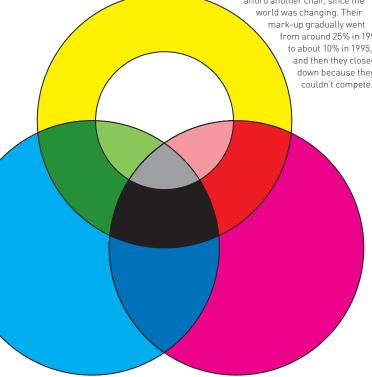
The fact is, PC hardware is not easily accessible in SA. Most advertising parties don't sell directly to the people who read their ads. This means people have a hard time buying stuff, and potential sales are lost or redirected to other products. I know some people like to believe 'exclusive' distributorship will guarantee that when they go down to a local shop and buy a brand X part, they always get a cut. However, the number of brands without a second source is quite small despite exclusivity claims, and most people will ignore the brand to buy whatever's available (as I discussed a couple of columns back). Therefore, for the market to grow and to increase profits, distributors need to start doing things like taking money from people who want to give it to them, and putting their prices and availability data on their Websites so people can buy directly from them. This means the end of the reseller club and their super-secret decoder rings and pricelists, but it'll work out for the best for everyone.

I know numbers and math can be daunting for many people. So, this time I'll give a neat graphical representation of the situation and try to show how being more open to direct purchasing can increase profits, even with lower prices. It's called a "Venn Diagram":

The Venn Diagram works via circles that intersect and have colours. Where they overlap, the colours mix to form new colours. In this diagram, the cyan circle represents the people who want to buy PC hardware. The magenta circle represents the people who can afford it. The yellow circle represents the people smart and persistent enough to get through this 'reseller' nonsense and actually buy it, and the white circle within that represents the group of people who is smart enough to figure out they can just import it themselves for less.

Therefore, the black region in the middle is the entire current market for a local distributor. Selling directly online would add the much larger blue region. Reducing prices would add the green, light green and grey regions. Doing both would add all the above and most or all of the cyan part. As for the rest, like the magenta guys, it's hard to sell products to people who don't want them (though some places in the US sure try), so don't worry about them so much. Nevertheless, the rest should be easy to get, if you just stop living in the early 1990s. **NAG**

> **The Venn Diagram works via circles that intersect and have colours. Where they overlap, the colours mix to form new colours.**

HARDWIRED

by Neo Sibeko

DIRECT PATCH 10

I'VE BEEN GOING ON about DirectX 10 for quite a while, and recently we received the first few patches for our games that add DirectX 10 support. So far (at least when this was written) we have *Call of Juarez*, *Company of Heroes* and *Lost Planet*. There's no doubt that more will follow. However, let us hope that those that come next are better than what we have seen so far.

I'm not sure if it's fitting to say that these are representations of what DirectX 10 brings to PC gaming. I'm not even sure that we should be saying that DirectX 10 gaming has arrived. In the case of *Call of Juarez*, the performance is so bad that one wonders why the effort was even made. For less than half the framerate you would get on the regular DX9.0c game, you only gain minimal visual enhancements. Sure, the water particles look good and everything has an even greater shine, but that is hardly what the API is about.

The other two game patches do a much better job, but they are still largely last-generation graphics with a hint of next-generation visual effects. It wouldn't be even remotely enough to sway those who game exclusively on the consoles. Can we in all fairness expect the new API to automatically increase the visual quality of our games? After all, DirectX 10 is a tool, just as paintbrushes are tools for the painter and musical instruments are tools for the musician. Before DirectX 10, game developers were never equal, and they will continue not to be equal after DirectX 10. That is precisely why certain developers spring to mind when you try and think about graphically impressive games. These developers had the same API as everyone else and largely the same hardware (at least in terms of capability). What sets them apart is the quality of their actually graphics and not the tools. There's no tool that will make up for uninteresting visuals or low-quality artwork. Both of these are the creative elements of the development team, not necessarily the API.

For instance, there are a number of unpatched DirectX 9 games that look better than all the mentioned patched games, save for *Company of Heroes*. (This title, however, looked better than the rest already, so it's not the API.) So, once again it isn't DirectX 10 that we have seen so far. We can't actually see DirectX 10, to be honest. We can see the power and creativity it allows and nothing else really. To look at the abovementioned titles as representations of the API isn't what we want to do. For any title on the market (or that will ever be on the market) we can only say that it's what developer X is capable of and nothing more or less.

It's going to take some time and we are going to get many lemons on the way, but then again, we will also experience visuals that were unimaginable a mere five years ago. Besides *Alan Wake*, *Crysis*, games based on the CryENGINE, *Hellgate: London* and other triple-A titles, there will come a time when all the games are inherently DirectX 10 and not patched to support the API, but are designed to exploit the strengths of DirectX 10 and the operating system.

One thing that the API will do indirectly is at least improve model detail. This will mean sharper detail and more lively game worlds. However, these are by-products of a good API and are just a possibility, not a promise. **NAG**

" I'm not even sure that we should be saying that DirectX 10 gaming has arrived. In the case of *Call of Juarez*, the performance is so bad that one wonders why the effort was even made. "

AMD'S R600
FINALLY ARRIVES

IT HAS TAKEN MORE than three years to develop, and almost a full year after that for it to hit store shelves. We have waited patiently, and sometimes not so patiently. At some stages, we had expected the revolution of graphics rendering, but always managed to calm our expectations. It hasn't been easy for AMD going through a number of revisions and dealing with a number of manufacturing problems, delays and whatever else that one could imagine would plague the largest die ever created on a consumer level PC component.

That was the difficult birth of arguably the most advanced single graphics chip ever. After hundreds of millions of dollars and hundreds of hours spent on R&D and on a few re-spins, we have an impressive 720 million ASICs, which tower above any other core or GPU on the market and will likely remain so for at least a year and a half. Built on TSMC's 80nm process, it isn't as physically daunting as one might think. Measuring slightly larger than the R580 it replaces, it has more than twice the transistor density.

This may not seem like much, but it is paramount that one never forgets that the R600 is a whole new design from the ground up. In terms of raw processing power, it peaks at an incredible 475 gigaflops in real-world operations. No other consumer-level graphics solution can claim such figures, and in this aspect alone, it would suffice to say that the R600 has leapfrogged its predecessor by at least a factor of two.

The true genius of the R600 can be broken down into many parts, but those particularly worth mentioning are the superscalar stream processing units, the fully distributed ring-bus controller, the highly optimised texture units, and the programmable tessellation engine. AMD has managed to supply the core with 64 shader processors, which in turn house five stream processing units, all controlled locally by a branch execution unit. All five units within the shader share a common register space, which can be accessed by any of the five units. To further add processing power to the shader units, AMD has outfitted the last stream processor in each shader unit block with

the special ability to handle transcendental operations such as Sin, Cos, Exp and Log. All these operations previously would have taken at least two cycles. As it stands today, the R600 is the only graphics chip that can handle these operations in a single cycle.

At the same time, these shaders house a branch execution unit, which is fed by the global ultra-threaded dispatch processor. This processor, as the name suggests, dispatches process to the various shaders where each instruction is further broken down by the branch execution unit that feeds the stream processors. The type of instructions can

samples can be filtered in any one cycle. With each of the four texturing blocks containing four texture filter units, the maximum single cycle filtering method available is bilinear filtering. Obviously, for trilinear filtering a second pass would be needed.

The texturing units on the R600 also have a 256KB L2 texture cache, a smaller L1 texture cache and a vertex cache, all shared by the four units. The sampling abilities of the R600 are vastly superior to those of the R580, and they manage to feed all the stream processors previously mentioned with sampled data at a constant rate with minimal stalls at worst.

With all this data moving to and from various units and from the main graphics board memory, the R600 features an advanced ring-bus memory controller that is not centralised like a traditional memory crossbar. At the core of the memory bus are eight 64-bit lanes. These travel around in a ring-like manner (hence ring-bus) with various stops along the ring. This means more stops can be added to this bus in future or some removed for the lower-end parts. It's a scalable, but very efficient bus that can accept 512 bits of data both ways, giving the bus 1,024 bits in total for combined reads and writes. Externally, to the DRAMs, only 512 bits are made available, but these 512 bits result in over 100GB/sec of memory bandwidth.

One more impressive feature of the R600 is the programmable tessellation unit that has been lifted from AMD's previous project: Xenos from the Xbox 360. This tessellation unit is addressable directly and can be used in situations where geometry shader-based tessellation isn't suitable or not available entirely. It allows more detailed animation, more sophisticated shader effects and complex terrain, as it's a dedicated engine and highly optimised for these operations.

There are many more impressive aspects about the R600, but due to space constraints, we cannot delve into those. However, the parts highlighted here are fundamental to the R600 and contribute to a highly-sophisticated graphics core that is immensely powerful and is sure to be the base building block for future graphics chips from AMD. **NAG**

be anything from vertex to geometry and fragmentation. The shaders are truly unified and capable of handling five scalar MAD instructions (excluding flow control, which would make it six).

All this gives the R600 the processing capability of 320 stream processors, which is more than any other consumer unit available to date.

In an interesting move by AMD, it has outfitted the R600 with 80 texture samplers. However, that would be slightly misrepresenting the R600. There are four texture units, each housing twenty FP32 (128-bit precision) samplers, with eight texture address

processors in each unit (for the 20 samplers there are eight addressing units), for a total of 32 for the entire chip. However, it's paramount that a distinction between these samplers is made. While there are 80 samplers that can fetch a single data value per clock, only 64 of them can have these samples filtered. That means that the remaining 16 and their associated address processors don't have a filtering ability. There are situations where samples need not be filtered at all, but are still sampled. In this case, the GPU will operate as an 80-sampler part. However, most of the time it will be a 64-sampler part as a maximum of 64

ASUS EN8800ULTRA/G/HTDP/768M

NVIDIA'S GEFORCE 8800 ULTRA is, as far as what the Ultra name used to stand for, the first of its kind since the GeForce2 of 1999. Yes, we had the 6800 Ultra, FX5700 Ultra, 5800 Ultra and the 5900 Ultra, but none of these achieved performances worthy of the name. They were good products (save for the 5800) no doubt, but just not good enough to wear the name proudly. The ASUS EN8800ULTRA, however, returns to what made the Ultra cards so valuable a number of years ago.

You are by now familiar with the architecture of the GeForce 8800 series and the previous highest performing part in the form of the 8800GTX. That, however, doesn't mean you are familiar with the EN8800ULTRA. If you own an 8800GTX, it wouldn't be wise to go out and purchase the EN8800ULTRA, but for those who don't, the EN8800ULTRA is fast - very fast indeed.

In fact, it's faster than we expected and deserves the speed crown, as no other graphics card available today will match it in any benchmark (except for 3DMark05, where the competing HD 2900 XT is slightly ahead) or in game performance. At its heart is the same G80 GPU from November 2006, so just encase you missed it, it's a massive stream processor-based ASIC built on TSMC's 90nm GT process featuring 128 processors, 32 texture samplers, 24 render outputs, and is fully load balanced with DirectX 10 compliancy.

The Ultra, unlike any other card in the NVIDIA line-up, has the stream processors operating at an impressive 1.5GHz, the render outputs and samplers at 612MHz, the global scheduler at 756MHz, and the memory at 2.16GHz, for an impressive 103.6GB/sec bandwidth. This is quite amazing considering that the last Ultra card, in the form of the 6800 Ultra of 2005, had a measly 38.4GB/sec of peak data throughput. Using a synthetic benchmark to illustrate the power of the EN8800ULTRA, we ran 3DMark05 at 2,048 x 1,536 at the highest quality (transparency and gamma AA enabled), with 8x multi-sample AA, and recorded a score of 9,982 points (two 6800 Ultras in SLI achieved a score of 9,487 at the default 1,024 x 768 with no AA or anisotropic filtering at all). In fact, there's no descent title available today that the EN8800ULTRA cannot play at 1,920 x 1,200 with 8x AA. To appreciate this power though, you'll need a powerful CPU and an all-round good system. On our 3.71GHz Core 2 Extreme X6800 test machine, we achieved a default score of 21,142 in 3DMark05, 13,344 in 3DMark06, 46,087 in 3DMark03 and 65,790 in the old 3DMark2001 SE. However, our mild overclock on the CPU limited all these scores. With a more potent CPU, even better scores can be achieved.

Being a high-end, quality product from ASUS, the EN8800ULTRA comes bundled with a copy of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* and all the cabling you'll need. Also included are a driver disk, a CD wallet, and a 6-pin PCI-E connector. The EN8800ULTRA is the most powerful graphics card available and superior in every way to any graphics processor money can buy. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CORE	GeForce 8800GTX
VIDEO MEMORY	768MB GDDR3
CORE CLOCK	612MHz
MEMORY CLOCK	2.16GHz (1,080MHz GDDR3)
MEMORY INTERFACE	384-bit
CACHE	256KB (Shared stream processor cache)
PIPELINES	128 (32 texture samplers/24 ROPS)
API SUPPORTED	DirectX 10/ OpenGL 2.1

SCORE

BETTER THAN: Any other graphics card

WORSE THAN: Nothing

ASUS EAH2900XT/G/HTVDI/512M

AFTER ALL THE DELAYS and promises, the R600 finally made its appearance. While some expected the fastest graphics card ever, the truth is that the R600 was never geared at being the highest performing part, but the graphics card that delivered the best bang for your buck. In this context, the EAH2900XT is a resounding success. With 720 million transistors, it lays waste to any other commercially available die today. Built on TSMC's 80nm process, the GPU has a higher density than the competition's core, but in physical dimensions is actually smaller due to the process being 10nm smaller. However, core density is only important for board manufacturers and not necessarily the end-user.

What is important to us, however, is performance, and that is what the EAH2900XT is about. Unlike the competitor's core, the R600 doesn't make use of clock domains, and the core remains clocked uniformly throughout the entire core. Therefore, at 743MHz, the core is clocked higher than anything we've ever seen on a graphics card, and this core is quite easily clocked to 850MHz without much effort. Despite the leakage issues faced by the R600, the ASIC is highly scalable and it should prove to be loads of fun for enthusiasts all over the world. Apart from the large core and high speed, the EAH2900XT is also the first card to feature a 512-bit, 8 x 64-bit channel memory bus, providing an incredible 105.6GB/sec data rate, the highest available. This bandwidth is handled in a particularly interesting manner and is superior to a traditional crossbar. This memory controller is likely to pay dividends in future cores where the actual GPU will
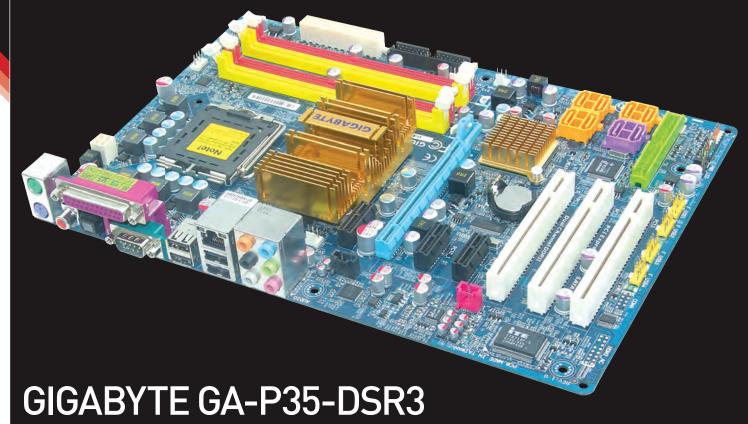
be able to maximise the available memory bandwidth. While the R600 core is capable in its own right, it's not an equal match for the memory controller in terms of innovation - in particular when compared to the outgoing R580 core.

This, however, doesn't mean the R600 is a slouch. In fact, it's the exact opposite. The Radeon HD 2900 XT is superior to the GeForce 8800GTS and close to the 8800GTX's performance, but at a price lower than that of the 8800GTS 640MB. It's incredible that AMD was able to produce such a product and still deliver it at such a low price point ($399). What's particularly impressive about the EAH2900XT is that it features the exact same number of texture samplers as the R580 at 16 units, but it's able to outpace the 8800GTS in some texture operations. Mathematically, the EAH2900XT is arguably superior to the 8800GTX even. There are many other technical aspects of the R600 that are worth a mention, but in terms of game performance and synthetic tests, the EAH2900XT is a success, eclipsing last-generation parts by large margins and outpacing the 8800GTS 640MB in almost all tests. The EAH2900XT, at lower framerates, delivers a more consistent performance than any other graphics card available today. This was particularly evident in the 3DMark03 Nature Test where the EAH2900XT, with its superior early rejection rate, managed to keep the framerate above the 100fps mark consistently, something that the 8800 Ultra in our machine couldn't manage. While we did experience some anomalies in some games, the updated drivers improved compatibility and performance. By the time you read this,

the drivers should be even better than when we tested the card.

The EAH2900XT features great performance and an even better price. The Inclusion of the Black Box coupon in the ASUS package further makes this a better buy than the 8800GTS 640MB. As far as bang for buck goes, the EAH2900XT is unmatched and will likely remain so for some time to come. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CORE	Radeon HD 2900 XT
VIDEO MEMORY	512MB GDDR3
CORE CLOCK	743MHz
MEMORY CLOCK	1.65GHz (825MHz GDDR3)
MEMORY INTERFACE	512-bit, 8-channel
CACHE	256KB (Sampler cache)
PIPELINES	64 x 5-way SIMD (16 texture samplers/16 ROPS)
API SUPPORTED	DirectX 10/ OpenGL 2.0

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
8800GTS 640MB

WORSE THAN:
8800GTX 768MB

GIGABYTE GA-P35-DSR3

AFTER THE SUCCESS OF the i975 and 965 chipsets, many people waited for the chipset that would bring the best of these together. That may be the P35, but is more likely to be the X38 as it's the enthusiast high-performance chipset to replace the 975. We had the Gigabyte P35-based GA-P35-DSR3, which by the time we received it, was already turning a few heads as it offers slightly better performance per clock when compared to the 965 chipset, but is seemingly easier to overclock with front side bus speeds in excess of 550MHz. The average P35-based motherboard seems to be overclocking far better than its 965-based equivalent. This could be a direct result of a number of things, but one thing is for sure: the 65nm process seems to have helped quite a bit.

On the Gigabyte board, the Northbridge is passively cooled with a large heatsink, as with previous 965-based boards. The difference, though, is that the Northbridge remains cool well over the 500MHz mark and is unlikely to need any further cooling at all. This isn't always the case with 965-based boards. The DSR3 PCB is rather short, but is still ATX compatible with only one PCI Express 16x slot, three PCI Express 1x slots and three traditional PCI 2.2 slots. The layout is neat with no obvious spacing issues apart from the first PCI-E 1x slot, which is located just against the Northbridge cooler. However, because of its positioning, one is unlikely to fit any card above the graphics card slot.

Keeping with tradition, Gigabyte has included legacy ports in the form of parallel and serial ports, which are great for those who have older printers and other such devices that aren't USB compatible. What makes this motherboard so great, though, aren't its looks, dimensions or anything else you can see, but its overclocking capability and the BIOS. The BIOS on the review board unfortunately had a few glitches. We couldn't, for example, monitor VCore (CPU voltage) in the BIOS, but were forced to use the included EasyTune5 utility. Nevertheless, that withstanding, the motherboard is rock solid in power delivery and in performance. With a plethora of memory dividers, one can easily find the sweet spot for their system, striking a near perfect balance between motherboard speed (FSB) and memory speed. This is particularly useful because this motherboard was capable of operating our CPU at an impressive 566MHz FSB. Besides a massive increase in available memory bandwidth, the high FSB also boosted CPU-intensive applications directly, as inter-core communications takes place via the FSB on the Intel platform. During our tests, 3DMark05, which is system dependent these days, received a large boost from the high front side bus speed, while keeping a slightly lower CPU frequency. At 566MHz x 6, we had far better results than at 486MHz x 7. While such a speed is not suitable for everyday operation, 533MHz worked just fine and strikes the perfect balance between temperature, strain on the chipset and performance. This is by far the most impressive board we've reviewed in terms of overclocking on the Intel platform.

This could have been the perfect board if it were not for a few issues that we encountered while overclocking. The board features a lovely auto-reboot feature should the system be too unstable and incapable of POSTing.

When this happens, it will automatically restart itself, turning on and off the system a number of times. This is fine if it happens once or twice. However, when one's trying to extract the last bit of performance from your components, it can be a disastrous affair with the system shutting down more than six times, increasing the risk of damaging your drives. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CHIPSET	Intel P35
CPU SUPPORT	Intel Pentium 4 LGA 775/Intel Core 2 Duo/Core 2 Extreme/Core 2 Quad
MEMORY SUPPORT	DDR2 533/667/800/1,066MHz
FSB	200/266/333MHz
PORTS	6 x SATA 3Gb/sec connectors, 4 x USB 2.0, Gigabit Ethernet, 1 x Serial port, 1 x Parallel port
SOUND	7.1-channel surround sound

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Most 965-based chipsets

WORSE THAN:
High-clocking i975-based chipset boards

OCZ DDR2 PC2-8500
REAPER HPC EDITION

THE OCZ DDR2 PC2-8500 Reaper HPC Edition is without a doubt the best set of DDR2 RAM we've tested here at *NAG*. The PC2-8500 Reaper HPC RAM will run at an incredible 1,333MHz at timings of 5-5-5-15. Yes, you read that right. With active cooling and a little aggressive voltage (which we wouldn't recommend), you can achieve DDR3 speeds. However, most people won't be able to reach that speed, so the ideal performance of this set is between 1,150MHz and 1,250MHz.
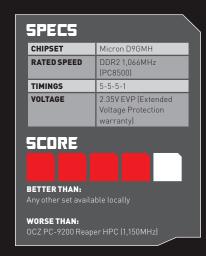
The ability to operate the RAM at a 1T command rate at above 900MHz is fantastic, in particular for NVIDIA chipset users. In our particular case, we were able to clock the RAM to an impressive 975MHz at 4-4-3-12. To exemplify the bandwidth provided by such settings, for the same bandwidth using a 2T command rate, we needed speeds in excess of 1,200MHz at timings of 5-5-5-15. Even at those settings, some benchmarks prefer the tighter timings with the 1T command rate.

The cooling employed, the high-quality D9 chips and the PCB make this one of the most desirable sets around. Suitable for the average gamer, but tailor-made for the hardcore overclocker, there isn't anything we could throw at this RAM that it couldn't do... The best settings seemed to be with the FSB at 500MHz and the RAM operating at 1,200MHz. With an adequately high enough

CPU speed (3.7GHz and higher), one can achieve bandwidth in excess of 9GB/sec. We achieved this on an Intel platform, so it's worth keeping in mind how much faster the RAM has to operate to reach this kind of bandwidth.

At 1,269MHz (5-5-5-15), we were able to record a Super PI 1.5 1M test score of 12.29 seconds with the CPU at 4GHz, which is pretty fast for a P35 chipset board. With further tweaking, this time could have been decreased (at the time of writing this wasn't possible, as there was no software that could change the RAM timings within the operating system).

If you're looking for high-speed RAM and you have a CPU that has a high FSB ceiling (in excess of 500MHz or more), then you should consider this set, as it really is that good. On an AMD platform, you'll have to do much more to get the most out of this RAM as far as numbers go. This is simply because there are few, if any, AM2 motherboards that have the ability to lock memory speed independent of the HT speed and multiplier. However, should you have a motherboard that is capable of at least 275MHz or more, the memory bandwidth that you can achieve will be (at least as far as DDR2 is concerned) in excess of 16GB/sec. This makes a massive difference when you're gaming at very high resolutions and where the increased data

rate comes into play. On our AMD Athlon FX-62 system, the results at resolutions of 1,920 x 1,200 and higher were better than those of the Core 2 Duo system. We kid you not! While the 3DMark results still favoured the Core 2 system, the game results proved otherwise.

The OCZ DDR2 PC2-8500 Reaper HPC Edition is primarily for overclockers, and its real benefits are only to be had on highly overclocked systems where it will perform beyond expectation. **NAG**
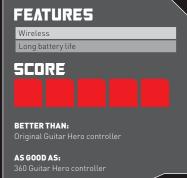
Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CHIPSET	Micron D9GMH
RATED SPEED	DDR2 1,066MHz (PC8500)
TIMINGS	5-5-5-1
VOLTAGE	2.35V EVP (Extended Voltage Protection warranty)

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Any other set available locally

WORSE THAN:
OCZ PC-9200 Reaper HPC (1,150MHz)

GUITAR HERO II WIRELESS CONTROLLER

RRP→ R499 | **Supplier→** Megarom
Website→ www.megarom.co.za | **Brand→** Red Octane

GUITAR HERO II ROCKS. If you don't agree with that statement, then we might have to explore the source of your angst as either being your lack of appreciation of good music or that you might be mentally challenged. Actually, scratch the last one – even the super-retarded would agree that *Guitar Hero II* is terrific, regardless of whether you have the PS2 or 360 version. However, let's say for argument's sake that you have the former: the PS2 game is great, but it's stuck with the original guitar design, which appeared with the first game. There's nothing specifically wrong with that, until you compare a unit to those being shipped for the 360. In short, the PS2 could use a better controller design – and here it is. Courtesy of Red Octane comes a new PS2 controller in the white-sheen/black strum configuration 360 owners have come to appreciate. Even the fret buttons have been compacted, but as an added benefit, the controller also does away with the short cable problem of the original controller by simply going wireless. Yup, something even 360 owners are still waiting for is readily available for PS2 owners. The controller, using three

AAA batteries, connects to the PS2 with a special wireless connector you plug into the controller port. From there on, all you need to worry about is the battery power running out. This took surprisingly long, and even after a few people forgot to turn the unit off after playing, it still maintained power long after I expected it to run dry. Overall, the design is great, and ergonomically it's extremely

comfortable. The only thing that eventually stopped its use was when the 360 version arrived. Unfortunately, it doesn't work on the console, else it wouldn't be languishing on the side right now. **NAG**

James Francis

NAG 〉〉〉
**HARDWARE
AWARD** ★

FEATURES

Wireless
Long battery life

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Original Guitar Hero controller

AS GOOD AS:
360 Guitar Hero controller

LOGITECH CHILLSTREAM CONTROLLER FOR PS3

RRP→ R397 | **Supplier→** Logitech
Website→ www.logitech.com | **Brand→** Logitech

THERE WILL NO DOUBT be a big market for PS2 controllers that work with the PS3, since your old PS2 controllers won't plug into a PS3 – it's all USB now. Logitech was very quick to discontinue the PS2 connectors in its range of controllers, splicing in the required USB plug and shrink-wrapping it all up with a nice PS3 badge on the front. The ChillStream for the PS3 is the ChillStream that you find for the PS2, but with a USB port.

As such, there is nothing wrong with the controller. Logitech knows when not to mess with a formula that works. However, when in context of a PS3, one has to wonder just how useful the PS2 ChillStream is. Because it is a native PS2 controller, it has no SIXAXIS support and R2 and L2 are still buttons instead of the new analogue triggers the PS3 controller sports. Therefore, the ChillStream works great if you're playing a PS2 game on your PS3. However, when you want to play a PS3 game, you'll have to pick up a different controller and set it to be the primary controller: a lot of hassle when you could just play the PS2 game with the PS3 controller to begin with (sure, there is no rumble now but Sony will include rumble in future PS3 controllers).

The ChillStream blows cold air onto your hands as you play – perfect for perspiring palms, but perfunctory for PlayStation 3 pleasure, possibly. **NAG**

Miktar "Holy Palm" Dracon

FEATURES

Blows air
Comfy

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Sweaty palms

WORSE THAN:
Most Mad Catz contollers

GAMETRAK: REAL WORLD GOLF

RRP→ R499 | **Supplier→** Mobile G
Website→ www.mobileg.co.za
Brand→ Gametrak

EVER SINCE WE STARTED simulating real life in games, we've been trying and trying to get closer to the real thing. Racing games have steering wheels, fishing games have tiny rods and now golf has it's own 'direct motion capture' system: The GameTrak. And it's actually a lot of fun, standing in front of your TV, swinging away with a tiny club. The GameTrak ships with a base unit, foot pedal and gloves, and is bundled with the game *Real World Golf*. The basic idea is that you connect the base unit to your PS2. The gloves then attach to the base unit with strings, which disappear into the base unit. And this is where the magic happens. As you swing, the strings move in and out of the base unit, thus translating your movement to the screen in real time. The level of accuracy is impressive. Just don't swing too hard; the little plastic club is not weighted, so you might pull some muscles. The GameTrak system also has a baseball version, sold separately. As for the game, *Real World Golf* probably wouldn't exist without the hardware. It's fun to play, even though the textures are dull and seemingly rare. It would have helped if you could navigate the menus with the PS2 controller, but you are stuck swinging your arms up and down to scroll left or right. This makes typing your name quite an experience. This is a golfer's game: it's accurate enough that you can adjust you club face just by twisting your wrists, or zoom to the flag by making a diving motion with your arms. During multiplayer, each person gets to finish their round, so you don't have to keep swapping gloves. If you're a germ freak, don't worry: you can buy your own gloves, so no sharing. This might be a good Father's Day gift, or maybe you can practise your swing at home to impress your boss at the golf day. Or just swing away with your buddies. It's perfect for that. **NAG**

Eddie Francis

* Exclusive to Musica

FEATURES

| Easy to set up |
| Very accurate |
| Good for groups |

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Getting a double bogey at St Andrews

WORSE THAN:
Tiger Woods Golf

XPLODER PS3 HD MOVIE PLAYER

RRP→ R499 | **Supplier→** Mobile G
Website→ www.mobileg.co.za | **Brand→** XPloder

FIRE INTERNATIONAL, MAKERS OF cheat devices for a number of major consoles, has recently expanded its product line to also incorporate media management products, and the PS3 HD Movie Player is the latest in its line of products. Billed as the PS3 equivalent of iTunes, the HD Movie Player is a single CD PC application packaged in a rather large tin (without the inclusion of a user manual), which primarily allows the user to convert movie files from a number of formats (including MPEG-1/2, AVI, WMV, ASF and others), as well as non copy-protected DVDs into a PS3-playable format. Additional features include MP3 conversion of CDs and the 'management' of photos and digital images for the PS3 and PSP, as well as the ability to download save-games from the online Xploder database. Data is transferred between the PC and PS3 by way of a USB flash drive, or any other memory card compatible with the PS3.
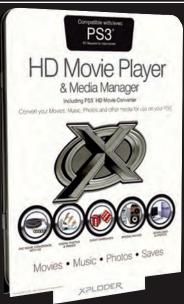
As a movie file converter, the Xploder does what it claims to: it's capable of converting just about any video file to a format compatible with the PS3 or PSP, though the process is quite a time-consuming one, with the conversion taking a number of hours to complete, even for relatively small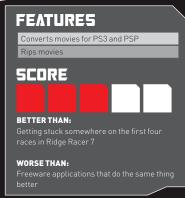 files. Furthermore, the device won't upscale any standard-definition video formats to HD (though the PlayStation 3 can now upscale DVDs itself, as of the 1.80 firmware upgrade).

As an MP3 ripper, the Xploder application seems to be slower than Windows Media Player's built-in ripper is. It does construct an internal database of any music or image files that you've imported into the program by drag-and-drop transfer, and allows you to copy files to and from removable storage devices, but the poor user interface offers no advantage over simply using Windows Explorer.

Perhaps the only advantage Xploder PS3 HD Movie Player offers over freeware video-conversion utilities already available on the Internet is access to the save-game database. Unfortunately, even this is less useful than it could be: at the time of writing, the database had save-games for only five different titles available, and most of those save-games had only a few checkpoints or races already completed. Until the database is extensively updated, the HD Movie Player is of very little use even as a PS3 cheat device. Ultimately, this program offers very little that isn't already available for free somewhere on the Internet. **NAG**

Adam Liebman

FEATURES

| Converts movies for PS3 and PSP |
| Rips movies |

SCORE

BETTER THAN:
Getting stuck somewhere on the first four races in Ridge Racer 7

WORSE THAN:
Freeware applications that do the same thing better

LG P1 EXPRESS DUAL 15.4-INCH WIDESCREEN NOTEBOOK

RRP→ R11,400 | **Supplier→** LG Electronics
Website→ http://za.lge.com | **Brand→** LG South Africa

LG'S SLOGAN IS "LIFE'S Good," and we cannot agree more. According to LG's global Website, the P1 Express Dual 15.4-inch Widescreen is a "dual power entertainer." It is powered by an Intel Centrino Duo T5600 processor running at 1.83GHz, packs an 80GB hard drive, features an ATI Mobility Radeon X1400 graphics card with up to 256MB of HyperMemory, and offers the user all the connectivity options he or she could need, such as WLAN, Ethernet and Bluetooth.

The P1 Express features an excellent 15.4-inch widescreen LCD with LG's Fine Bright technology for stunning graphics and multimedia. The P1 also features an inlaid numeric keypad, which in our opinion is a definite plus, and DME (Direct Media Experience), which means that the user can watch a DVD on the P1 without having to boot into the operating system.

The P1 further features Dolby 5.1-channel sound, a 3W speaker system, SRS (surround sound) and XTS Pro for above-average notebook sound when watching DVDs or playing games. Yes, that dedicated ATI Mobility Radeon enables the P1 to play most graphically intensive games with relative ease (we played *Tomb Raider: Legend* and Lara's wobbly bits were, well, nice).

The P1 also comes equipped with a fingerprint reader for enhanced security features to safeguard your sensitive data. Setup is quick and easy with the bundled OmniPass software. The P1 also comes bundled with LG Intelligent Update, which automatically keeps your notebook's firmware and other components up to date.

However, out of the box, as is so often the case with computer products, the P1 is less than adequate, in our collective opinion. While it is a stunning-looking and well-designed notebook, it has its shortcomings. In our opinion, it's a sin to ship any notebook computer with less than 2GB of RAM. The P1 comes supplied with only 512MB of memory, which severely affects performance. Moreover, LG skimped a bit by only endowing the P1 with an 80GB HDD. No serious notebook should ship with less than a 160GB HDD.

NAG's expert opinion on the P1 then: it's an above-average replacement for your ageing rig, but needs some immediate upgrading such as more RAM and a larger HDD. **NAG**

Nati de Jager

SPECS

PROCESSOR	Intel Core Duo T5600, 1.83GHz
HARD DRIVE	80GB SATA
RAM	512MB DDR2 SDRAM (667MHz)
SCREEN	15.4-inch, WXGA 1,280 x 800, Fine Bright
GRAPHICS	ATI Mobility Radeon X1400, 128MB (256MB HyperMemory)
OPTICAL DRIVE	DL DVD±RW
PORTS	PCMCIA Type II/ExpressCard slot, 5-in-1 memory card slot (XD/SD/MMC/MS/MS Pro), Docking-port, FireWire, 3 x USB 2.0, Microphone, Headphone, S/PDIF, RJ-11, RJ-45, S-video
DIMENSIONS	35.53cm x 3.17cm x 26.14cm
WEIGHT	2.78kg
AUDIO	Intel High Definition Audio, SRS TruSurround XT, SRS WOW XT, 5.1-channel Dolby Digital, 24-bit High Definition, XTS Pro, 3W stereo speakers, integrated microphone
INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS	Modem (56K), Gigabit Ethernet, WLAN (802.11a/b/g), Bluetooth (BlueCore 4)
OS	Microsoft Windows XP Professional (SP2)

SCORE

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Headset Roundup

When it comes to gaming headsets, everyone has a different opinion on what they like and expect of a headset, which makes the whole thing rather subjective. As a result, one should rather consider this Headset Roundup more of an examination of each of the ten headsets, and less of an actual review of each one.

On the matter of 5.1 Surround headsets: there technically isn't enough room in a headset between the speakers and the ear to create a convincing surround environment. The front and back channels, while certainly playing the correct spatially-relevant sounds, are so close together next to the ear that the brain has a hard time sensing them as 'front' and 'back'. Quite often, manufacturers throw around the 5.1 Surround feature, when in reality consumers really aren't going to get much out of it. For surround headphones to work, there has to be definite separation of the front and back speakers in the headset, positioned relatively far in front and behind the ear. As an example, the Ear Force AK-R8 from Turtle Beach puts a good 4cm between the front and back speakers inside the headset, which improves the chances of surround recognition dramatically.

However, none of the surround headsets in this roundup put much structural emphasis behind their surround, and as a result, surround will be listed only as a courtesy and should not be considered something to base your purchase on.

To examine each headset, they were put through a variety of tests. The first (and classic test of a headset), was to listen to an MP3 of *Bassgasm* (Ultimate Woofer Test) by Techmaster P.E.B., which does an incredible job of pointing out when a headset has issues with high or low frequencies, or the resonance between them. We used the established HD280 PRO as the baseline and compared the sound quality of each headset to it. Further tests were done using Realtime Analyzer (www.ymec.com) and its Signal Generator and Oscilloscope. Using the Signal Generator, we generated test tones from 10Hz all the way up through to the 22kHz frequency range to see how well the headset handled the range. Using the Oscilloscope, we examined how much noise filtering (if at all) headsets with microphones offered on their microphones.

EMERIL LAGASSE'S HORSERADISH COLESLAW

- 5 cups shredded green cabbage;
- 5 cups shredded red cabbage;
- 2 cups shredded carrots;
- 1/4 cup finely sliced green onions;
- 2 Granny Smith apples, cored, cut into;
- 1/4-inch cubes;
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice;
- 1/2 cup cider vinegar;
- 1/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar;
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt;
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper;
- 1 cup mayonnaise;
- 1/4 cup sour cream;
- 6 tablespoons freshly grated horseradish, or 3 tablespoons prepared horseradish; and
- 1 tablespoon Creole mustard or other coarse-grained mustard.

Combine the green and red cabbages, carrots, and green onions in a large mixing bowl. In a small bowl, toss the cubed apples with the lemon juice and add to the cabbage mixture. In a small mixing bowl, combine the vinegar, sugar, salt, and pepper and whisk until the sugar is dissolved. Pour the seasoned vinegar mixture over the cabbage mixture and toss to thoroughly combine. Cover with plastic wrap and transfer to the refrigerator for 20 to 30 minutes.
In a small bowl, combine the mayonnaise, sour cream, horseradish, and mustard and stir to combine. Add the mayonnaise mixture to the coleslaw and toss to thoroughly combine. Cover and refrigerate for at least one hour and up to overnight before serving. Makes eight to ten servings

SENNHEISER HD280 PRO

Supplier→ NewEgg | **Website →** www.newegg.com | **RRP →** $74.99 (price sourced from www.newegg.com)

When it comes to sound quality and structural design, Sennheiser has repeatedly proven itself highly capable of delivering. The HD280 PRO may not be a new model, but it's a time-honoured favourite around the office, specifically due to its capacity for keeping music and gaming sounds in, while keeping all environmental sounds out. The HD280 PRO quite often appears in clubs as a DJ favourite for exactly this reason.

The HD280 PRO is a straightforward headset that covers the entire ear with soft earpieces that are both comfortable and noise suppressing. One only really appreciates just how well it blocks sound once you've had them on your head and notices that now you can't hear a damn thing anyone is telling you. The headset connects to a sound output via a coiled cable that's 1m long, but can easily stretch out to at least 2m. The cable ends with your standard 3.5mm jack connector, but comes bundled with a screw-type adapter for connecting to ¼-inch old-school inputs.

The earpieces can rotate and collapse for easy storage, reducing the space the headset takes up almost by half. One of the main features of the HD280 PRO is that it's user serviceable: every part of the headset is easily replaceable (as long as you can get the parts, that is). This ups the longevity of the headset quite dramatically, since a simple crack in the headband or a popped speaker can be replaced - no need to go buy a new headset.

While the HD280 PRO lacks a microphone, critical for online gaming, it more than makes up for it in every other area including price point. In terms of sound quality and frequency range, the HD280 PRO remains unmatched.

MEDUSA 5.1 PROGAMER HEADSET

Supplier→ Speedlink | **Website →** www.speedlink.de | **RRP →** R699

Complete with a handy travel bag, the ProGamer Headset folds up economically tight into the padded interior of the bag, leaving enough room to house the separate power adapter that connects to the USB power cable on the headset. The power adapter is a useful addition if you don't want to power the ProGamer via a spare USB port, and the adapter itself has its own little pouch that attaches via Velcro to the inside of the travel bag.

The headset comes with a grouping of cables for converting the 3.5mm jacks to generic left/right RCA connections if you're going to be using them on a self-powered speaker system. The in-line remote, which sits comfortably on the cable from headset to connector, has volume wheels for controlling the front, rear, centre and vibration volumes from zero to ten. It also has an on/off switch for cutting off the headset entirely. What it lacks is a mute or on/off button for the microphone itself. The microphone is bendable and sits on the left, with decent enough sound quality on the recording, but with no noise suppression.

The actual sound output of the ProGamer seemed slightly grainy compared to the HD280 PRO, and the surround was almost completely unnoticeable due to the front/back speakers in the headset being close to each other. When there is a high level of bass in the stream, the headset vibration kicks in, but quickly becomes very annoying. Extended use of the vibration actually lowered the comfort rating of the ProGamer, which is a moderately comfortable headset as long as your ears aren't being buffeted by two vibrating cups. The ProGamer has a good low range in terms of frequency response, but cuts out a little early in the high range (around 16kHz to be exact, when it should go up to at least 20kHz).

MEDUSA 5.1 SURROUND HOME HEADSET

Supplier→ Speedlink | **Website →** www.speedlink.de | **RRP →** R999

The (much) bigger brother of the ProGamer, the Home Headset, has the same bendy microphone as the ProGamer with the same quality, but it can be detached. Since the Home uses its own powered amplifier, it also supports having two input devices connected at the same time (such as a PC and a DVD player), and you can switch between the feeds via a button on the amp. You don't have to use the amp: a provided adapter that ends in the expected 3.5mm jacks lets you plug the headset straight into your sound outputs. It actually comes with two adapters: one for full 5.1 and another for just front and mic).

The Home also folds in on itself for storage and has the same nice long cable as the ProGamer. During shipping, one of the headphone pads came off and it took extreme finger contortion to get it back on. Then it popped off again. Our advice is to seek the help of a professional (or adult) when trying to put the headphone padding back on, or you might end up hurting someone.

The headset comes with two full input ribbon cables, as well as converters for plugging into RCA outputs. It has an in-line remote with controls for front, rear, centre and vibration (zero to ten on a roller). There's no on/off switch on the in-line, but there is one on the amp along with a main volume control knob. The

Home has serious sound leakage, and if you like to listen to your music loud, everyone around you will be listening too. The headset itself is comfortable, and once again, the surround capabilities go

by mostly unnoticed. No on/off switch for the microphone anywhere, sadly, but the headset has a good low range like the ProGamer, but also cuts off at the high 16kHz mark.

TRUST 5.1 SURROUND USB HEADSET

Supplier→ Trust | **Website →** www.trust.com | **RRP →** R686

When it comes to headsets that are also sound cards, gamers can be very fickle (since they have probably already shelled out for a nice expensive sound card). The Trust USB Headset is a USB headset that has its own sound card, so using it negates anything you already have in your machine in terms of sound output. Thankfully, the sound quality of the Trust is acceptable. It comes with a bendable microphone on the left headphone, which lacks an on/off switch on the in-line remote. The remote itself only contains a sound mute, volume up and down and a switch for setting the subwoofer level (max, norm, off).

The in-line remote only functions once you've installed the drivers that come with the Trust, which requires an annoying reboot after installation. The headset itself is comfortable, but the top brace that sits on your head feels a bit too thin and hard for extended comfort. Once again, the surround capability went by unnoticed as it was impossible to tell if something was in the front or at the rear. The headset leaks sound like a sieve, but sports some serious vibration when listening to anything with bass. It can actually cause your eardrums to itch, and prolonged use is not recommended unless you like how the vibration feels.

The included driver has settings for environmental effects and equalizer. But who actually uses that? It supports EAX 2.0, and is compatible with DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Stereo and Dolby Pro Logic II.

There were absolutely no issues with the frequency range response. The headset managed the full expected 20Hz to 20kHz

with surprising alacrity. The microphone has reasonable sound quality, but lacks any kind of noise reduction.

CREATIVE FATAL1TY GAMING HEADSET

Mr Wendel has a wide range of products that, according to marketing, has been designed (and consulted on) by him to make sure they're seriously leet. The Fatal1ty Gaming Headset, to its credit, certainly looks like the type of headset a self-respecting gamer would wear: the slick curves and shiny red patches really do look nice. It comes with a travel baggy to keep it secret and safe, and we can happily report that the microphone is detachable and bendable. It's also the first headset to actually get the in-line remote right in our minds, presenting volume adjust and a coveted microphone on/off switch.

The headset has a respectable 2m long cable and a solid, comfortable design that felt as if it would remain comfortable for the many hours required when you're pwning noobs at a LAN or online. The microphone itself has a foam windscreen that does a surprisingly good job of filtering out background noise. The recording quality of the microphone was particularly impressive, letting everyone hear your smack-talking with crystal clarity.

Oddly though, the headset has a very low baseline volume level, which felt just a little too low for our tastes. You'd have to boost your volume beyond the standard Windows volume adjuster to get it really loud (how we like it). The headset is very straightforward and almost honest in terms of what it's giving you, and we had a hard time faulting it. It is obviously geared at gamers who will no doubt appreciate the construction and microphone quality.

FEATURES

Stereo
Removable microphone
2m cable

GENIUS HS-04V

FEATURES

Stereo
Fixed microphone
1m cable

When it comes to what people think of Genius products, you get two very distinct camps. Some people think Genius is a play on words, in that only a "Genius" would buy their crap. Others appreciate the low prices of Genius products and don't mind the quality because they don't expect much in the first place.

The HS-04V comes with a bendy microphone complete with foam windscreen, as well as an external adapter for powering the built-in vibration. The adapter takes two AA batteries, or you could just use the supplied USB cable to power the vibration via a USB port. It has an in-line remote adorned with a volume wheel and a three-level switch for vibration (off, norm, max). The most striking part of the headset is its open-air design. Around the headphones are holes that let in air, which certainly feels fresh compared to headsets that are part suction cup, but a lot of sound leaks out of those holes. On the plus side, it does let you hear what people are telling you.

The microphone yielded good quality and there are no real issues there, but the vibration that kicks in when there is bass felt downright annoying, overly ambitious even. Switching off the vibration revealed that without it, the HS-04V has practically no bass.

The frequency response sat between 33Hz and 17kHz, which loses a lot of your nice low bass and your higher pitched sounds and effects. Sure, the headset is cheap as dirt, but if you're a gamer, you're probably going to want to save up a bit to get something you won't want to replace in a few months anyway.

LOGITECH PREMIUM USB HEADSET 350

Supplier→ Purama | **Website →** www.logitech.com | **RRP →** R377 (price sourced from Take2.co.za)

Another USB audio device, the 350 sure doesn't look like much until you actually put it on. It has a small, swivelling, non-bendy microphone on the left that may feel too short, but it really isn't. The in-line remote has basic volume control and a mute for the microphone, but it's the sound quality where the 350 really shines, especially considering its price.

The headset has a surprisingly meaty low range capable of rendering strong, heady bass that really thumps against your eardrums nicely. There is almost no sound bleeding out of the headphones when they're against your ears, and they remain surprisingly comfortable even after extended use. The headset applies a touch too much pressure against the ears when fresh out of the box, but that should disappear after breaking it in for a few days.

The sound quality of the headset is superb, and matched only by the impressive microphone that does a great job of clearing out background noise and static due to its built-in noise cancellation. Hitting the mute button on the in-line remote cuts the microphone off instantly and turns it on equally fast when pressed again. The recording quality on the microphone was practically perfect and even managed to record background conversations in the office with clarity. The 350 could have done with a slightly longer cable and its high frequency cuts out just 2kHz short of what is standard these days (at 18kHz), but the price, combined with the quality of what you're getting for it, really makes the 350 an appealing purchase.

PLANTRONICS AUDIO 550 DSP

Supplier→ Headset Solutions/Cameo Group | **Website →** www.plantronics.co.za | **RRP →** R1,060

Astronauts on the moon relied on Plantronics. The box that the 550 DSP comes in says so. However, someone should probably tell Plantronics that the moon landing was almost 50 years ago and gamers are slightly more demanding than Mr Armstrong was. The one thing that we'll always remember about the 550 DSP is that it certainly looks funky. The squarish headphones are very different from the slick ovals we're accustomed to, but we can't shake the feeling that perhaps our grandparents would have worn headsets like this.

Despite how it looks, it's comfortable. The tiny in-line remote has a microphone mute and volume control for rocking out harder or softer. We were quite pleased with the long 3m cable - not that we needed it, but extra length is always a plus. The microphone sits on the left and flips down on a swivel. Only the last 20% or so of the microphone pole is bendable, and overall, the microphone has great recording quality with reasonable noise cancellation.

As a USB headset, the 550 DSP sports its own Digital Signal Processor, which sits as a little box near the end of the cable before the USB connection. This allows it amicable sound quality and a perfect frequency response range. There is mild sound leakage on the headset. If you played your music loud, someone nearby might be able to make out what you are listening to. While the 550 DSP is by all accounts a decent headset with rich sound, the price tag should make you wary of any kind of impulse purchase.

PLANTRONICS AUDIO 370

Supplier→ Headset Solutions/Cameo Group | **Website →** www.plantronics.co.za | **RRP →** R690

The smaller and sexier version of the 550 DSP is the 370, which doesn't use a USB connection and instead favours the more standard headset jacks, letting you use your own soundcard. We say sexier, because the giant open-ear design of the headphones makes you look like Princess Leia. The 370 has the same flip-out microphone as the 550 DSP, complete with the QuickAdjust bendy bit at the end. The in-line remote has a standard volume wheel and an on/off switch for the microphone. The microphone has the same quality as the 550 DSP's.

The 370 comes with a respectable 2.9m cable, but suffers from a low baseline on the volume compounded a little by the open-ear design. The open-ear design does let you hear team-mates shouting at you, which is practical if you're into team e-sports. Surprisingly, the 370 had some frequency response issues in that it only started at 30Hz and ended at around 18kHz. The slight loss in low frequency is no doubt the result of the open-ear design in conjunction with the low-volume baseline.

The 370 is a solid headphone that may make you look a little like a space princess, but does the trick in terms of comfort and microphone recording quality. The price point seems a touch higher than it should be, and the 370 would probably be a much more appealing package if you could shave off R200 from the retail price somehow.

TRITON AX360 AUDIO XTREME 360

Supplier→ mobileG | **Website →** www.mobileg.co.za | **RRP →** R1,399

First impressions of the AX360 reveal a headset that is both big and bold in its design as well as its implementation. It sports 'true' 5.1 Surround, because it has a proper AC3 decoder box that you can opt to use if you're into that kind of thing. If you do, the headset itself unfortunately doesn't have enough spacing between the spatial speakers in the headset, so the whole surround effect is lost unless you really concentrate. The AX360 comes with a soft headset baggy and sports a bendable detachable microphone that clips onto the left headphone and can be adjusted practically any which way.

It has an in-line remote for adjusting front, centre, rear and subwoofer volume levels, but no microphone muting. The nice thing about the AX360 is that the decoder box it comes with lets you use optical or coaxial connections straight into your PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360 or DVD player (if your DVD player has digital, that is). It comes with an adapter for plugging the headset straight into standard 3.5mm outputs without using the decoder box. Switching off the vibration feature of the headset revealed practically no bass without it, and the vibration itself really is distracting.

An extension cable lets you connect the microphone, attached to the headset, straight to the Xbox 360 controller if you're using the AX360 with your 360 for playing on Xbox LIVE. The microphone has no noise filtering, but does have decent recording quality. There is mild sound bleed from the headset, but nothing to really worry about. You can connect the decoder box to a self-powered 5.1 speaker system if you

want to pump the surround out over speakers instead of the headset. The decoder box can do some range adjustment and change the time delay on the centre/sub channel. The AX360 is appealing if you're interested in upgrading to 'true' surround and the natural way you can use it with a 360 is a bonus, but for general gaming it may be too high-level a product.

Conclusion

The biggest surprise in the roundup, especially considering its price, is the Logitech Premium USB Headset 350. The crisp sound quality and impressive bass make the headset well worth the price, and the fact that it has a fine microphone with excellent quality and noise reduction doesn't hurt. It's hard to pick a clear winner though, because of the subjective nature of headsets. However, if we had to pick for ourselves, the HD280 PRO and the Logitech 350 would be at the top of our wish lists. **NAG**

A GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED 'CRAFT WAR AT BLIZZARD'S WWI

WITH ALL THE HYPE surrounding the announcement of StarCraft II, the rest of the World Wide Invitational found itself somewhat overshadowed. However, it would have been a mistake to write off either of the two tournaments featured at the event: WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne and StarCraft: Broodwar, Blizzard's signature e-sports franchises. In attendance were sixteen players of the most exceptional stature, and the matches that followed were, indeed, nothing short of exceptional themselves.

Despite the invitation of the relatively undecorated Human player, Franklin "Nilknarf" Pearsall, from the United States, the WarCraft III tournament was littered with star names. First on the list were the eminently recognisable European duo, Manuel "Grubby" Schenkhuizen (playing Orc), winner of last year's World Series of Video Games, and Yoan "Tod" Merlo (playing Human), winner of the World E-Sports Games Masters, also in 2006. Joining them was the near-unbeatable Night-Elf, Jae Ho "Moon" Jang, reigning champion of the WarCraft World War. Also from the South Korean camp were the Undead players, Dae Hee "Fov" Cho (Electronic Sports World Cup 2004 champion) and Jung Hee "Sweet" Chun (winner of the previous World Wide Invitational), as well as Battle.net Season 4 champ, Sung Sik "Remind" Kim, playing Night Elf. Chinese double World Cyber Games winner, Xiaofeng "Sky" Li, playing Human, rounded off the list.

To maximise the spectator-value of the tournament, Blizzard opted for a single-elimination format. With such a high-profile list of attendees, the fireworks were due to start right from the first round. With Sweet versus Sky, Grubby versus Fov and Tod versus Remind, the audience was treated to three classic match-ups – and the losers would be given no second chances. As the defending champion of the previous WWI, the pressure to perform was on Sweet. Cruelly, however, he found himself pitted against one of the world's greatest Human players. Less than a month earlier it had been revealed that the Undead race was extremely vulnerable to a Human strategy involving the Paladin as first hero. Sure enough, Sky exploited the racial weakness of his opponent to win in two straight maps.

In the second first-round match, it was Grubby who would hold the racial advantage over Fov, with the Undead army being traditionally weak against an Orc player using the Tauren Chieftain hero. However, Fov had other plans. Using superior micromanagement skills rather than new strategies, he succeeded in edging out the win and causing the first major upset of the tournament. In the third match, most expected Remind to make short work of Tod – he was even slated to win the entire tournament. Yet no matter what Remind tried, Tod seemed to have a counterattack waiting. In the end, there was no contest, and Tod won in two easy maps.

The fourth match, between Moon and Nilknarf, was far closer than anyone had been expecting. Moon showed a chink in his armour, losing on the map "Turtle Rock"– a

game that would have serious implications later in the semi-finals. Nilknarf fought bravely, silencing his critics who had been expecting him to be whitewashed. The other two maps, however, were closer to the predicted result. Moon recovered from the setback to win comfortably in the end.

In the semi-finals, it would be Sky against Fov and Tod against Moon. Sky's luck couldn't have been better: two Undeads in a row. No one had yet figured out how to counter the Paladin strategy, and it seemed as though it would be a straightforward victory and a place in the final match. However, after losing the first match, Fov took a brilliant gamble and picked the Panderan Brewmaster as his first hero. Not being an Undead unit, it was immune to Sky's Paladin. This forced Sky to return to the usual Archmage-first strategy for game three, but Fov put the nail in the coffin with his trademark micromanagement, winning 2-1.

Tod versus Moon had always been a thrilling match to watch, as the two had often created brand-new tactics for use against each other. In a humorous twist, both opted for a mercenary strategy (hiring generic units from mercenary camps) on the map "Echo Isles," and the game turned into a bizarre mirror match. After a number of back-and-forth battles, Tod managed to get his expansion base up and running while successfully destroying Moon's. With the resource advantage secured, the outcome was inevitable, and Moon called "good game." The second map was "Lost Temple" – usually avoided by Night Elf players because of the strategic opportunities it offers Human and Orc players. However, after losing to Nilknarf, Moon had used his veto to remove "Turtle Rock" instead, and this oversight put Tod ahead from the beginning. Again securing the early resource advantage, the Frenchman claimed victory for the second time.

The final match of such a high-level tournament was always going to be close. True to form, it took three maps to settle. Each player eliminated their weakest maps from the map pool, and each, in turn, won their own choices ("Terenas Stand" for Tod and "Twisted Medows" for Fov). This left

the score at 1-1 and only "Echo Isles" still to be played. Anticipating the Paladin-first strategy from Tod, Fov chose the Panderan Brewmaster as his first hero. However, he - and everyone else - was surprised to find that Tod had followed the standard Archmage-first strategy. Thus, Fov was unprepared for the focussed fire from the Archmage, and consistently found his hero on low health. Forced to retreat out of several important battles, the Panderan was far less effective than it might otherwise have been. Tod didn't falter, and continued to apply pressure until eventually Fov called "good game," and the match was over.

The StarCraft: Broodwar tournament was interesting for an entirely different reason. While all of the participating players were South Korean - and so there were no surprises as to which nation would take home the crown - it would be the first time in over a year that a major tournament would be won by a Protoss player. StarCraft of late has been dominated by Terran, with Yeon Yeoul "Nada" Lee firmly at the helm. The recent recipient of OnGameNet's Golden Mouse award for winning Star League three times (and since then, a fourth), Nada had been doing away with opponents left right and centre.

However, spectators knew history was in the making when the young Protoss player, Taek Yong "BiSu" Kim, upset Nada in a startlingly one-sided semi-final match. Using dragoons as the basis of his army, with zealots shuttled in for support, he flawlessly countered Nada's army of siege tanks and vultures. In game two, Bisu used a strategy that had hardly been seen at a professional level since 2003: mass carriers. So outdated was the tactic that Nada seemed to have forgotten how to play against it.

Bisu then went on to face the Zerg player, Jae Yoon "Savior" Ma, in the final. In a close three-mapper, he broke the deadlock with a quick zealot rush, catching Savior as he attempted to expand early. In this fashion, Bisu joined Tod at the top of the podium, both holding their trophies high. Each took home a cheque for $10,000 and the honour of winning Blizzard's most prestigious official tournament. **NAG**

Mutant Melee Spitter

DUNGEON RUNNERS

IT'S ALL THE RAGE these days for publishers to release some interesting (yet ultimately shallow) MMO titles that are 'free', but offer a First Class for those who are willing to pay. Often, as is the case with *Dungeon Runners*, paying for the 'premium service' is entirely worth it if you actually like the game to begin with.

Dungeon Runners (by NCsoft) is such a 'free' MMO, and the basic gist of the game really is that of a *Diablo 2* clone with some appealing (yet minimalist) visuals and a few nice features that make the deal that little bit sweeter. As a hack and slash, you run around instanced dungeons and areas causing serious ecological damage by killing anything you come across that moves. What doesn't move, you pick up and sell in town. What *Dungeon Runners* is going for is the casual market that doesn't want to fuss or spend months converting time into progress. Dungeons in *Dungeon Runners* are short, 15-minute affairs where you and a few friends

head in, head down, hack on and then pop out to sell stuff and assign some attributes to your character. Class progression is achieved by buying more skills or spells, depending on whether you're a Warrior, Ranger or Mage.

With its serious focus on casual play, *Dungeon Runners* does everything to get you into the game as fast as possible and with as little hassle as possible. Your friends can even teleport directly to where you are when they log on (no need for you to meet up anywhere and coordinate). You just jump in, group up and head on in.

As a *Diablo* clone, you click on creatures to attack them and continue to hold down the mouse button until whatever is under it dies. Blue potions restore mana, red ones restore health. You can find better weapons and armour, both rather imaginatively and humorously titled since *Dungeon Runners* doesn't even try to take itself too seriously.

What paying the utterly small monthly fee

gets you should appeal to anyone who enjoys *Dungeon Runners* in the first place. You get access to more powerful items sooner, can stack potions for convenience, and you are also bumped to the front of the queue to log onto the servers when the servers are full (otherwise you may find yourself waiting up to 15 minutes or more just to log on and play).

In terms of both its business model and what it actually has to offer, *Dungeon Runners* is a fun, easy game that capitalises on the *Diablo* mechanics without really innovating anywhere. It's a good, solid experience that may lack the dramatic flair of more contemporary MMOs, and it certainly doesn't have the cut-scene flair or visual crispness *Diablo* offered. However, what it sets out to do it does with amicable consistency and quality. It's not *World of WarCraft*, but that's not a bad thing. To use an analogy, a tractor doesn't have to be a Ferrari and *vice versa*: both exist for two entirely different tasks. **NAG**

A GUIDE TO XNA FROM SCRATCH

XNA AND THE CONCEPTS BEHIND IT REALLY ARE GREAT. BEING ABLE TO DEVELOP ON AN OFF-THE-SHELF CONSOLE IN YOUR OWN HOME IS AWESOME. HOWEVER, STARTING A NEW XNA PROJECT AND HAVING THAT GENERATED CODE STARE BACK AT YOU CAN BE RATHER DAUNTING. YOU NEED A MAP, AND A BIT OF DIRECTION NEVER HURT ANYONE.

YOU ARE HERE: A NEW PROJECT

A **NEW XNA PROJECT TENDS** to look a little bare, especially compared to the examples available: they have all these cool helper classes and functions all over the place, setting up their shaders and making things happen. Right now, you have two C# files and a couple of extra things to do with icons and the like. One of the C# files, program.cs, is the entry point to your game and contains the obligatory main method that gets your game going. Its job is simple: getting your game thread running, which it does wonderfully as it is, so we'll never really need to touch it again.

The real core of your virgin project lies in Game1.cs (the default name that the project template assigns - feel free to change it to whatever your game's really called). It inherits from XNA's claim to fame - the framework's Game object - and thus has all the sections that a game typically needs. We'll go over them briefly and explain their purpose:

public Game1()

This is your game's constructor. It sets up your game object and makes sure it has access to important services. You'll note that it sets up the two default member variables that come with an XNA game: graphics and content.

Graphics provide a handle for your game to access whichever graphics card it's running on, allowing you to change settings and actually output things to the screen. All your game's rendering is done by setting up your graphics device accordingly and then lobbing data at it. A departure from the DirectX 9 architecture here is that the actual graphics device itself is placed within a manager, which is a more understandable abstraction and allows the framework more flexibility.

Content is XNA's answer to the old DX9 methods for getting textures, meshes and the like from files. Not only does the new ContentManager handle importing resources for you, but it also maintains them in memory and acts as a library of sorts. It's also rather easy to extend, meaning you can load your own custom formats or resources with little hassle. Extensions for most of the popular model formats are already available online, in fact.

protected override void Initialize()

As the helpful comment text states, this is where you're supposed to set up your game's initial state. Essentially, this method is automatically called by the framework once (and only once) as your game first starts. Use it as a place to create the various data structures and systems that your game

XNARacer, one of the XNA examples in action.

Popular 3D engine, Torque, has an XNA build available.

Garage Games have also recently released the 2D oriented Torque Game Builder.

needs. Typically, you'd put things like setting up input handlers, creating map-loaders and menus here.

You'll also notice that this is the first place where the XNA framework places a base call at the end of the method. It does this to give you a chance to set up your game systems before it goes on to initialise any components (or other framework-level plug-ins), which you might be using. Your game logic comes first, which is always good, plus it gives you the option to handle everything yourself if you don't want the rest of the framework to do things for you.

protected override void LoadGraphicsContent(bool loadAllContent)

This method is here for you to load all your graphical resources into the game. You may be wondering why this is explicitly not part of the Initialize method. The reason is that a game might need to reload graphics in certain situations: if the game is Alt-tabbed or display settings are changed in Windows, for example. To further complicate matters, graphical resources can be loaded into two different memory pools (think of them as different areas for different things). Some resources - the ones in ResourceManagementMode. Automatic - are in main memory. These don't need to be reloaded in certain situations because the content pipeline makes sure they're re-copied to graphics memory as needed, whereas the resources

Another XNA example, this time from the book: XNA Professional Game Development.

in ResourceManagementMode.Manual are only loaded into specialist memory once. You need to make sure that they'll be reloaded correctly if the graphics device is lost or reset (i.e. another program uses the graphics card) - hence the two 'modes' that LoadGraphicsContent can be called in.

protected override void UnloadGraphicsContent(bool unloadAllContent)

This is exactly the same as LoadGraphicsContent, except that here you need to free resources from memory when the game unloads or Alt-tabs. Don't get lazy and assume that the garbage collector will do everything for you. There are situations where this method will be called and your game isn't about to shut down anyway. That's why these two loading methods are important... In general, you probably won't have to worry too much about resources - not until you start using specialised pixel shaders or complex data.

protected override void Update(GameTime gameTime)

This is the meat and potatoes of your game where all the actual gameplay logic happens. This is the fabled game loop itself... Okay, maybe that's a bit melodramatic for something that's just called as often as possible, but it's still pretty nifty - especially the way that XNA allows you to use either a fixed or variable time step.

With fixed time steps, the framework will try to call your Update method at a specific rate - the default being 60 times per second. The same elapsed time is always passed into your game each Update, but if the game is running slow (possibly due to doing too much during a Draw call) it sets the GameTime. IsRunningSlowly flag, allowing you to take steps to get the game back to 'real' speed again.

When your game is in variable time mode, it simply means that the Update method is called as often as possible, immediately after a Draw call as finished. This means that you can get really high framerates if your game doesn't do all that much, but it does make handling things like speed and movement a little more complicated: you have to take the time that has elapsed between successive frames into account and not just assume that it's constant as in fixed time step mode. If you're used to the way Game Maker works, variable time steps might be a little confusing at first.

As we've said, Update is where all the game logic happens. This includes things like moving objects around in your game, triggering sounds, dealing with user input and even more complex behaviours like handling collisions. You have to code all this yourself, as XNA provides methods that can be helpful

and practically does a lot of rendering for you (the fiddly bits, not the actual drawing, but we'll get to that), but it doesn't provide much else in terms of game-specific logic. Of course, there's plenty of useable gameplay code in the various XNA examples. Just make sure you understand what you're putting into your game and why.

protected override void Draw(GameTime GameTime)

This method forms the second part of the game loop, which alternates Update→Draw→Update→Draw→, etc. in a continual cycle until the game is closed or crashes. Draw's task is simple: making sure that everything in your game draws itself to the screen the way you want it t o. XNA provides a host of different drawing methods and functions: from drawing simple rectangular sprites for 2D effects via SpriteBatch (very similar to using sprites in Game Maker), through to rendering meshes in 3D space. Typically though, things are a little more complicated than simply calling a function and having something appear on screen... A useful image is to think of the graphics device (which we created in the constructor) as a converter that turns different kinds of data into coloured pixels on the screen. You have to turn various dials and knobs on this powerful machine and then feed it raw info and it'll spit out graphics – the raw info being things like meshes and textures, graphical resources loaded using the ContentManager. The knobs and dials are which Effects to use (Effects are vertex and pixel shaders - XNA doesn't have a fixed-function pipeline like DX9 used to) and various states on the device, like whether or not to draw transparently, or if it should use the depth buffer, etc.

WHERE YOU WANT TO BE: USEFUL GAME LOGIC IDEAS

While it might be really simple to create a SpriteBatch with a few Textures and start splattering sprites around directly inside your main game class, that's just asking for trouble later on once your game gets larger and more complicated. Because games in XNA are all about objects, it would make sense to keep track of the objects that are currently in your game as part of the levels, characters, puzzles or whatever. Unfortunately, keeping them in a couple of big arrays is only a good idea for very small or limited games.

Over the years, games have evolved various data structures to store objects and allow them to be quickly drawn to the screen. Because the positions of game objects in the game world are often very important, these structures tend to be organised in a way that lets objects that are

close in the game be kept together. This speeds up things like collision checking and drawing objects. You don't want to waste time seeing if two objects on opposite ends of a level collide, just like you don't want to bother drawing something if there's no way for the player to currently see it.

Thus, your first step in developing any XNA game should be to consider what form of data structure you want to store your game objects in, as well as what you want those objects to be able to do and why (which will help you write those objects themselves). However, this is getting perilously close to engine building and we're running out of space... We'll tackle the various structures used in games next month. **NAG**

```csharp
Using Statements

namespace WindowsGame1
{
    /// <summary>
    /// This is the main type for your game
    /// </summary>
    public class Game1 : Microsoft.Xna.Framework.Game
    {
        GraphicsDeviceManager graphics;
        ContentManager content;


        public Game1()
        {
            graphics = new GraphicsDeviceManager(this);
            content = new ContentManager(Services);
        }


        /// <summary>
        /// Allows the game to perform any initialization it needs to before starting to run.
        /// This is where it can query for any required services and load any non-graphic
        /// related content.  Calling base.Initialize will enumerate through any components
        /// and initialize them as well.
        /// </summary>
        protected override void Initialize()
        {
            // TODO: Add your initialization logic here

            base.Initialize();
        }


        /// <summary>
        /// Load your graphics content.  If loadAllContent is true, you should
        /// load content from both ResourceManagementMode pools.  Otherwise, just
        /// load ResourceManagementMode.Manual content.
        /// </summary>
        /// <param name="loadAllContent">Which type of content to load.</param>
        protected override void LoadGraphicsContent(bool loadAllContent)
        {
            if (loadAllContent)
            {
                // TODO: Load any ResourceManagementMode.Automatic content
            }

            // TODO: Load any ResourceManagementMode.Manual content
        }


        /// <summary>
        /// Unload your graphics content.  If unloadAllContent is true, you should
        /// unload content from both ResourceManagementMode pools.  Otherwise, just
        /// unload ResourceManagementMode.Manual content.  Manual content will get
        /// Disposed by the GraphicsDevice during a Reset.
        /// </summary>
        /// <param name="unloadAllContent">Which type of content to unload.</param>
        protected override void UnloadGraphicsContent(bool unloadAllContent)
        {
            if (unloadAllContent)
            {
                // TODO: Unload any ResourceManagementMode.Automatic content
                content.Unload();
            }

            // TODO: Unload any ResourceManagementMode.Manual content
        }


        /// <summary>
        /// Allows the game to run logic such as updating the world,
        /// checking for collisions, gathering input and playing audio.
        /// </summary>
        /// <param name="gameTime">Provides a snapshot of timing values.</param>
        protected override void Update(GameTime gameTime)
        {
            // Allows the game to exit
            if (GamePad.GetState(PlayerIndex.One).Buttons.Back == ButtonState.Pressed)
                this.Exit();

            // TODO: Add your update logic here

            base.Update(gameTime);
        }


        /// <summary>
        /// This is called when the game should draw itself.
        /// </summary>
        /// <param name="gameTime">Provides a snapshot of timing values.</param>
        protected override void Draw(GameTime gameTime)
        {
            graphics.GraphicsDevice.Clear(Color.CornflowerBlue);

            // TODO: Add your drawing code here

            base.Draw(gameTime);
        }
    }
}
```

MOVIES

AT THE CINEMA:
PAN'S LABYRINTH

A LONG TIME AGO, PRINCESS Moanna, the daughter of the king of the Underworld, wandered up to the surface. Blinded by the sun, she turned human, turned ill and eventually died. However, the king believed her spirit would be reborn and waited for her. Then, during post-Civil War Spain, a young girl and her mother move to her new stepfather, Captain Vidal, who fights anti-fascist rebels. There she encounters a strange insect and is led into a strange ancient labyrinth. The English title is inaccurate in that it's really a faun she meets there and not Pan. Still, this excellent fantasy tale from the director of *Hellboy*, *Cronos* and *Mimic* should be well worth seeing. It's already won many awards and plenty of critical acclaim - definitely one of the must-see movies of the year. Just be warned that this fantasy tale isn't for young children.

They Live

Cast: Roody Piper, Keith David
Director: John Carpenter
Genre: Action/Sci-Fi
Rating: 18

In the near future, things aren't going too well. Unemployment is rampant and it just looks like things are getting worse. Mysterious pirate television broadcasts try to warn people about a sinister force that is controlling everyone. No one believes them, least of all a drifter who is new in town. However, when he stumbles upon a pair of special sunglasses created by the resistance, he can suddenly see that the aliens controlling the world are everywhere. Naturally, he's not going to take that sitting down.

The movie: John Carpenter has created some gems in his career and this is definitely one of them. The premise is stretched a bit far. However, since when hasn't that happened in one of his movies? Often funny and pretty cheesy, *They Live* is highly entertaining. If you need one reason to see it, it's the fistfight between the two good guys.

The DVD: Only a making-of doccie.

COMICS **Written by Clive Burmeister**

Witchblade/The Punisher #1

Format: Comic 1-shot
Publisher: Top Cow/Marvel
Writer: Ron Marz
Artist: Adriana Melo
Price: R33.50

The Punisher is tracking down a Russian assassin who is being escorted to a maximum-security prison by none other than Sara Pezzini, a cop who is also the bearer of the mysterious artefact known as the Witchblade. Things heat up between these two as they fight to decide the assassin's fate: prison or execution. I didn't find this to be the most imaginative crossover ever, but it's probably a good read for fans of either comic title, and looks to be only the first of a few Marvel/Top Cow crossovers this year. The next will involve The Darkness and three heroes from the Marvel universe...

New Warriors #1

Format: Comic Series
Publisher: Marvel
Writer: Kevin Grevioux
Artist: Paco Medina
Price: R33.50

There's a new group of super-powered vigilantes on the streets of New York, hunting down villains and steering clear of the authorities. But who are they, and what do they want? Most of the mutants of before have either been taken out of the picture or have found a way to live 'normal' lives. However, is that enough for these heroes who used to save the world, and can such people give in to this new way of life? For the New Warriors the answer is no, and this is only the beginning of their fight for freedom.

Severance

Cast: Toby Stephens, Danny Dyer
Director: Christopher Smith
Genre: Horror
Rating: 16VL

A group of employees from an arms company head off to a remote cabin somewhere in Hungary, where they are to participate in some team building for the weekend. However, the lodge is run down and looks abandoned, not to mention that in the opening sequence someone gets gutted. Obviously, someone is out to get them.

The Movie: *Severance*, for some reason, is supposed to be funny and scary, like *Shaun of the Dead*. However, *Shaun of the Dead* smartly blended wit with zombies: two things that can work together. Zombies are funny. Crazed killers chasing people around woods and torturing them to death isn't. There are plenty of funny moments and things that were supposed to be funny, but you hardly feel giddy despite the creepy location and unsettling premise. The story doesn't hold much water either, so in the end, the only reason to see this is for a cheap night of entertainment. However, it won't be a wasted evening.

The DVD: The DVD is packed with stuff, including a large cast commentary. There are also plenty of tidbits, making-ofs and other interesting things. If, however, you fancy the movie enough to own it, the DVD is well worth the purchase.

Stay Alive

Cast: Jon Foster, Samaire Armstrong, Frankie Muniz
Director: William Brent Bell
Genre: Horror
Rating: 16VL

A new game called Stay Alive seems to be killing everyone who plays it. The friend of one of the victims ends up with a copy of the game. Since it's unreleased code, he and his friends are eager to play it and get into multiplayer sessions. But then they all start dying one by one. The only way to stop it is to find out about the woman in the game: the Blood Countess.

The movie: Did you know that Cliffy Bleszinski, the designer behind *Gears of War*, was the gaming consultant for this creative endeavour? We happened to spot that in the credits, though we suspect his only contribution was suggesting the Game Informer covers in the end sequence. For the rest, it's crap. If you play games, you'll get annoyed at the research, which was possibly done with Google and talking to six year olds on LIVE. If you don't, it's a completely stupid, not scary horror. Either that or you're not allowed to watch real horrors yet. Maybe we've just watched too many of them.

The DVD: Commentary and an effects montage. There's even an ad for a holiday resort after the trailers.

Prison Break

Cast: Wentworth Miller, Stacy Keach, Sarah Wayne Callies
Director: Paul Scheuring
Genre: Thriller (TV)
Rating: 13V

The brother of a wrongly accused assassin executes a well-planned escape to get the two of them out of prison. He has several aces up his sleeves, the biggest being a cryptic body tattoo that is really a masked blueprint of the prison facility. In the meantime, though, his brother's enemies are trying to make sure he meets his date with the electric chair.

The Movie: Well paced and smartly written, you've probably heard of *Prison Break* by now. You've most likely already watched it and chances are you enjoyed it. Well, here it is: the first season on DVD. However, the real appeal is the price: for less than R300, this collection of seven discs has every episode as well as extra material fans will love. We hope more of these affordable box sets show up.

The DVD: Commentary, a making-of, doccies about the show and its themes, plus deleted scenes.

The Boys Volume 1: The Name of the Game

Format: Graphic Novel
Publisher: Dynamite Entertainment
Writer: Garth Ennis
Artist: Darick Robertson
Price: R139.95

Superheroes keep watch over the world. However, who keeps watch over the superheroes? What happens to civilian casualties in their super battles, and do they even care? And what happens when all that power goes to their heads? Meet The Boys, a group of special individuals working for the CIA to remind the superheroes that they're not in charge. Garth Ennis, arguably one of the best comic writers in the industry, really ups the stakes with this book. With his brilliant story and in-your-face writing, you'll be dying to see what happens next. It won't be long after reading this book and collecting the first six issues, before you're hooked on the monthly comic. Just a note: this one is definitely rated M for mature readers!

Full Metal Panic! Overload! – Volume 1

Format: Manga Graphic Novel
Publisher: ADV Manga
Creator: Shouji Gatou
Artist: Tomohiro Nagai
Price: R94.95

A new take on the original *Full Metal Panic* story, *Overload* is an amusing, if somewhat crazy, look at how Sosuke, a militaristic bodyguard, more interferes with than protects his charge, Kaname, a high school girl who is going off her mind with Sosuke's insane badgering. Guns, explosions, booby-trapped school hallways; these are just some of the things that poor Kaname has to deal with in this story.

RAVEN'S LOFT

X MARKS THE SPOT

THIS MONTH MARKS THE release of *Magic: The Gathering*'s Tenth Edition, and the game's fifteenth anniversary. Wizards of the Coast has followed popular trends and opted to abandon the numeric representation. Instead, tenth edition will be represented by an X (Roman numeral ten, in case you didn't know!) By the time you read this, some more preview information will have surfaced, but here is what we have gleaned so far...

MY LAND – IT HURTS!

So-called "pain-lands" are back. These are non-basic lands that can be tapped for colourless mana, or tapped for a mana of either of two specific colours, at the cost of one damage to their controller. These lands have been a staple, particularly for tournament players, for many years. Therefore, we are glad to see them returning, even though some players lament the fact that this will mean that the dual "shock-lands," introduced in the Ravnica block, will almost certainly not be making an appearance. Nevertheless, we can but hope that those will be reprinted some time in the future.

GOLDEN OLDIES

Some other past favourites will be performing encores in this set. A particularly noteworthy one is Reya Dawnbringer. This classic legend, originally from Invasion, will likely see considerable play both at casual tables and at tournaments. Granted, she is quite pricey to bring out (but Akroma has shown us that this fact doesn't deter players, particularly in colours where she can be "cheated in" with Resurrection effects, or the like), but her ability has the potential to grant massive card advantage. Being white makes her a perfect fit for decks running Wrath of God, by allowing a player to summon creatures with wild abandon, allowing the opponent to then get a bit ahead in terms of creatures, clearing the board with a Wrath, and then summoning Reya to start bringing one's own casualties back from the dead.

Other cards returning in this set hail from a huge variety of previous sets, including cards from Visions and Mercadian Masques, for example. Many players will be pleased to hear that Incinerate and Hurricane are being reprinted - old favourites for many players, and allowing cards in old collections to not be entirely obsolete. This set is also unusual in that it is a Core set featuring a fair number of legendary creatures.

Here's a list of Tenth Edition cards known at the time of going to print:

- Cho-Manno, Revolutionary (Mercadian Masques);
- Glorious Anthem (Urza's Saga);
- Paladin en-Vec (Exodus);
- Reya Dawnbringer (Invasion);
- Story Circle (Mercadian Masques);
- Air Elemental (Alpha);
- Arcanis the Omnipotent (Onslaught);
- Time Stop (Champions of Kamigawa);
- Ascendant Evincar (Nemesis);
- Lord of the Pit (Alpha);
- Nantuko Husk (Onslaught);

- Nekrataal (Visions);
- Vampire Bats (Legends);
- Incinerate (Ice Age);
- Kamahl, Pit Fighter (Odyssey);
- Mogg Fanatic (Tempest);
- Shivan Hellkite (Urza's Saga);
- Squee, Goblin Nabob (Mercadian Masques);
- Hurricane (Alpha);
- Might of Oaks (Urza block);
- Molimo, Maro-Sorcerer (Invasion);
- Stampeding Wildebeests (Visions);
- Troll Ascetic (Mirrodin);
- Crucible of Worlds (Fifth Dawn);

- Fountain of Youth (The Dark);
- Howling Mine (Alpha);
- Loxodon Warhammer (Mirrodin);
- Mind Stone (Weatherlight);
- Platinum Angel (Mirrodin); and
- Underground River (Ice Age).

An interesting break from tradition is the fact that Tenth Edition is being printed with black borders, a first for an English-language Core Set. The worldwide release events will be taking place on 14 July, and the promotional foil card will be Reya Dawnbringer. Exciting stuff! **NAG**

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HOW TO BREAK UP WITH SOMEONE TO PLAY GAMES

HOW TO BUILD A CONSOLE

THÁT'S RIGHT! WĔ GŐT IT AND YOŮ DON'T

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WØRLÐ 'SCLUSIVĘ!!!
SUPER SECREȚ MGS4 FACTS ŔEVEALED

<Umlauts are for sissies>

ÜBER EDITOR

My girlfriend has broken up with me. She made her feelings clear when she slapped me with the restraining order. Apparently, I'm not allowed to come within 500 metres of her and I have to stop telling people that we're a couple. She even went as far as to claim that we never dated. But I know better. For years, she has been the flower than made my heart bloom into a kaleidoscope of scarlet, red, black, purple, blue and red. We were both children of the night, kindred souls who wandered the plane beyond the sight of mere mortal humans and sang along to Nightwish albums.

So, in my anger and frustration, I needed an out. At first, I thought of leaving a hand-written note on old, tea-stained paper, after which I would end my life with a sacred ceremonial dagger. Unfortunately, pewter is terrible for cutting skin, so I resorted to a more suicidal situation: *Übergamer*'s editorship. I challenged the last peon to a game of Vampire. He at first protested, saying that it was supposed to be a videogame of some sort. But I asserted my superior knowledge of true gaming by pointing out how much older and wiser pen-and-paper RPGs are, plus that the rules didn't state that you had to choose a videogame. He barely had his character rolled when I walked over with my powerful Toreador mistress and tore the poor fool's head off. Now I find myself in charge of the single most powerful force in gaming journalism.

As the new editor, I have tried to bring a positive change to the magazine. In a meeting with the art director, I requested that we use more silk textures and rose motives in the design. I also suggested that we tone the screenshots slightly to give game characters deeper features. Finally, I pointed out that characters wearing leather or corsets should take preference for the cover. Unfortunately, he responded by saying he couldn't be arsed with changing the design, since then he'd have to edit the batch files, which compile the magazine from a folder where we dumps everything. This would explain why the wrong text sometimes appears in the She held him close, breathing deeply. He was her one true love, the solitary fisherman who lost his wife in that unfortunate fire. As she felt his heart beat, she pulled closer to him and team building through a séance session, but the technology editor spoiled it all by arriving drunk and demanding to speak to his dead roommate, who had lost his car keys. Ü

Alexander DuJeVoia
Übergamer Editor

ÜBER NEWS

EX-GIRLFRIEND NOW RUNNING WITH LUXONS, TELLS ANGUISHED READER

An *Übergamer* reader has told us of his terrible emotional suffering following an in-game break-up in *Guild Wars*.

"She's a beautiful Mesmer," Trent Freds (27) told us in an exclusive interview. "She first caught my eye break dancing outside the Guild Hall in Lion's Arch. She had such splendid grace and form." Freds' character, a strapping blonde warrior, nervously approached the lithe Mesmer with a proposal to scour the nearby Cursed Lands together. The relationship lasted a little over three weeks before terminating abruptly on 23 April, following a heated row over loot.

"I can't bear the thought of her break dancing for someone else," he hiccupped. "And she could play air guitar like no one else. Some of my fellow guild members have seen her running around the Crystal Desert with an anonymous Luxon Ranger. It's just soul destroying."

He paused to compose himself, blinking back tears, and then told us how his desire to play Guild Wars – once an all-consuming passion – has waned dramatically since the break-up.

"We had this... thing. Like a little ritual, I suppose. After a good drubbing, we'd always high-five each other. I wonder if s he hi gh-fives that damned Ranger. Oh, it hurts." Ü

ASK HEI-YU SUK

Übergamer has imported an über-hardcore consultant all the way from South Korea. He's here to beat you all to a bloody mess with his vastly superior knowledge of everything. And we don't even have to pay him because he doesn't have a work permit.

Q. I was hoping you'd be able to give me a few hot pointers on my *Unreal Tournament* game. While I can hold my own against, say, four or five of my kid sister's friends, I'm totally annihilated whenever I play online or go along to local LANs. I've never really mastered wall jumping, and I just can't seem to get to grips with the Shock Rifle. What do you suggest?
- Rodney, Limpopo

A. You Western dogs and your so-called shooter killer games. Where is skill, where is strategy, what is the point? Give up this strange silly running about with guns. Hai! Play *StarCraft*. This is a majestic game, true game. You will see.

Q. While cruising in my Pinto, I hit a 'dog' that turned out to be Sonic the Hedgehog. What do you reckon is the best method to dispose of the body, currently residing in the deep freeze under the peas.
- Bruce, Johannesburg

A. This happened to me too - Alex Kidd ended up smeared under my minivan. Hai! Luckily, I can tell you all videogame characters taste like ginger chicken. Is not so bad. SEGA will cry now, ha!

Q. I don't have any friends. Please help.
- Alexi, Pretoria

A. You play *Protoss*? This is probably because you play *Protoss*.

Q. Hei-Yu Suk? Oh, I get it!
- Tarryn, Cape Town

A. I do not understand your question? Ü

LUCASARTS BEING SUED FOR 1993 RELEASE

A class-action lawsuit has been filed against multimedia entertainment colossus, LucasArts, by a contingent of irate citizens from the town of Edison, VA. They claim the likenesses of their suburban backyards were used without due permission in a game called Zombies Ate My Neighbors, and portrayed as appropriate venues for all manner of irresponsible unruliness. This includes sequences featuring delinquent children armed with toy weapons trespassing on private property and using trampolines without removing their shoes first, chainsaw-wielding maniacs carelessly destroying hedges, and, of course, the shambling re-animated dead.

"For a global manufacturer to recreate our law-abiding neighbourhood with semi-photo-realistic quality," said the group's spokesperson, Mr Zak McKracken, "and then encourage people to have water gun battles in the gardens is beyond belief and highly irresponsible."

When asked why they had waited nearly fifteen years before taking action, McKracken picked his nose thoughtfully for a moment before replying, "We were busy, I suppose." **Ü**

NVIDIA TO DEVELOP PRO-GAMING CARDS

Übergamer, being hardcore, recently had a look at NVIDIA's upcoming products aimed at pro-gamers, the NVIDIA Quad Damage line. These cards will be designed specifically for the pro-gamer, and available only to the most hardcore by special offer. "We basically took a look at how the competitive gamers were playing," said an NVIDIA spokesman. "We saw what they really needed wasn't better image quality with more shader effects, but really fast rendering of solid colours."

The Quad Damage will require four PCI Express 16x slots, with full 16x lanes on each. Each card will have a single texture unit at 40GHz, designed to vastly improve texturing speed at 'picmip' settings higher than five. Also, the cards will support hardware Gouraud shading. While this feature is rarely used in modern games, special drivers will convert light maps to Gouraud gradients, which will then be rendered at ultra-high speed in hardware.

Also, the new cards will feature external PS/2 and USB ports on the back, and all input functions will be handled on-card in hardware. Rumours have it that NVIDIA is in talks with id Software to have the entire *Quake III* and *Quake 4* code base converted to a 900-million transistor, fixed-function pipeline on the GPU. **Ü**

MORE HERO TITLES ON THEIR WAY

Guitar Hero developer, Harmonix Music Systems, recently announced its intentions to expand the enormously popular franchise, with *Flute Hero* already well into development.

"The flute is a scandalously underrated rock instrument," a spokesperson for the company told *Übergamer*. "Just look at Jethro Tull and... oh, it's phenomenal, really phenomenal. We think that gamers are going to be thrilled with the revolutionary new flute controller we'll be bringing out. It's black with a spitting cobra embossed along the side. Really hard."

The company has also applied for patents on a prototype plastic accordion and didgeridoo. **Ü**

COMPETITIVE GAMER FAILS TO BITCH ABOUT LOCAL TOURNAMENT

When asked by *Übergamer* TV roving reporter, John "lolghey" Krans, how the ESPC qualifiers were, participant, Alistar "TitBoy" van Rensburg, had no complaints. "It was a good event. Everyone had a great time and the organisers were really on top of things," Alistar admitted. "I'm really glad I went. There was a lot of good competition and I'm happy I managed third place." There has been a lot of lively debate about the controversial comments from Alistar, and a board of inquiry has been set up to deal with both the mounting questions from the competitive gaming community, and to address concerns the ESPC has raised. "We're just not sure what to make of what TitBoy had to say, and we're really concerned he may be setting a precedence," ESPC spokeswoman, Vicky "LadyLegs" Amstre, admitted to the press. "We're just not sure if there is a future for competitive e-sports with people like him around." **Ü**

REINVENTING THE RTS
God Sorter Q&A

A new action game called *God Sorter* plans to do all kinds of great things with the genre. We chat to Sven Svensen, the game's producer at developer, God Sorter Games, about his project.

UG: Why the name God Sorter?
SS: Well, you've got a gun and it's called God. That way, when someone asks you what to do, you just say, "Just kill 'em all. Let God sort them out." It pretty much explains the motivation of the entire experience of the game - you just shoot plenty of bad guys.

UG: and then, God sorts them out?
SS: Yup!

UG: In what? A cut-scene? Will you see God sitting there going, "You over there, you over there..."?
SS: What? No, God's written on the gun. It's the gun's name. 'God' sorts them out when you shoot the bad guys.

UG: Oh! Clever! But wait a minute. That sounds familiar. Isn't that from *Duke Nukem*?
SS: Well, I'm glad that you've made a connection between that great title and *God Sorter*. The team is definitely geared towards developing the same kind of revolutionary game that *Duke* was. We really want *God Sorter* to be a remarkable milestone for fans of the genre. But it will be out before *Duke Nukem Forever*. I promise!

UG: No, we meant you stole the idea from a quote in *Duke*.
SS: You can't prove that. Besides, what you're suggesting is that only *Duke* and 3D Realms have a right to use the concept of God sorting things out.

UG: They actually do. They trademarked it just after *Max Payne*.
SS: Really? We'll have to get our lawyers to check on that. Oh, thanks for f#$ing up our game.

UG: Yes, back to the game. You said it will be revolutionary. So one can suppose there's more to it than a gun named God?
SS: Of course! There are plenty of guns and each of them is named after a different deity. You could use the awesome power of the shotgun, which is named Ra, or the homing missile launcher named after Jupiter. We also have weapons named after Krishna, Zeus, Buddha and many other deities.

UG: Zeus? What does that one do? Shoot lightning?
SS: Lightning? Not a bad idea! [Pauses to make a note] Clever! You're smarter than you look.

UG: We get that a lot. What on earth does the Buddha weapon do?
SS: It shoots out a fat man who lands on the bad guys.

UG: You don't think that Buddhists might find that offensive?
SS: What are Buddhists?

UG: People who believe in Buddha.
SS: There are still some of those? I kinda figured that such an old religion wouldn't have worshippers anymore. Not that it matters. It's probably a small group. Besides, if they are all 'non-violent' like Buddha, then what are they gonna do? But we are sensitive to people's cultures and religions. As you might notice, we don't have a Xenon gun.

UG: So what else makes your game special?
SS: It uses a proprietary engine a few of us have been coding in our basement for the past few years. What sets it apart from anything else out there is that it uses pixels like molecules. So, we build all of the entities out of virtual equivalents of the real-world molecules. If you need plenty of water, the engine renders thousands of H_2O molecules.

UG: Wouldn't you need trillions of molecules to make that much virtual water?
SS: That's a great question! We encountered the problem early on, which is why we changed the game's location to a desert setting.

UG: But what about the sand?
SS: Funny thing, you need very little H_2O molecules to make virtual sand.

UG: Will this even run on our machines?
SS: No, not yet. We're holding off until later this year when we expect processor wafers from super computers to become commonplace in desktop PCs and gaming consoles. Ü

FLYING PENIS WEDDING RUINED BY NORMALCY

A ttendants at the wedding of SexyChick69 and LandOwnerBaptist in the popular MMO, *Second Life*, were horrified when the wedding was crashed by hordes of players running around as regular human-shaped avatars. The friends and family were shocked and appalled by the sudden 'attack', and SexyChick69 told reporters that she was "really disappointed that so many people have nothing better to do than to ruin our wedding." LandOwnerBaptist has started several groups to take action against the perpetrators, claiming that "people who want to look like a flying penis in a game have a right to get married in peace," and that "if they really had to do it, why did they decide on something so horrible as to just appear in large groups as regular people. It's disgusting." Ü

SOUTH AFRICAN GOLD FARMING INDUSTRY SUFFERING

I t's been a lean year for South African gold farmers. Thanks to rising bandwidth costs, local gold farmers have had a hard time competing with their international counterparts. "We just can't run as many scripts as Americans or South Koreans," Andre "LOLS2RICHES" de Beer told reporters last week at the annual gold farming convention held in Klerksdorp. "We implore local MMO gamers to not buy foreign farmed gold and they should rather support the local market by buying gold farmed proudly in South Africa." Analysts expect the gold farmers to appeal to the government for a subsidy if the current trends continue. Ü

LAN FALLS INTO SINKHOLE AFTER CAUSING MINOR EARTHQUAKE

G amers attending the Ahem2K LAN in Kimberly have finally been reunited with their families after a terrifying ordeal. "It was totally like WTF man," said Andre Jeanpants. "Everyone knows you need a 7.1 system to have the edge these days, but nobody could hear their own rigs, so they kept turning up the volume. Then suddenly, the whole place started to come apart."

LAN organisers believe that a feedback loop over the local teamspeak server amplified the sound of a rocket when 32 players were involved in one game, generating enough bass to trigger a minor fault line hidden beneath the event. The entire LAN found itself in a sinkhole as the ground underneath collapsed.

Authorities were quick on the scene, and lowered over 400 cases of Red Bull and 80 extension cords into the hole. Despite the best efforts of rescue crews, the majority of gamers were unable to climb a lowered ladder or too heavy to be carried up by rescue teams. Eventually, after nine urine-holding hours, an excavator was brought in to dig a shallow ramp in the side of the two-meter deep pit, ending the ordeal. Ü

BEAUTIFUL KATAMARI DEV: "I'M JUST A BARN BUILDER"

Reports from the future already indicate what a lot of fans have expected: the upcoming *Beautiful Katamari* is one exceptional gem and continues the great legacy of the 'roll crap into a ball (RCIAB)' genre.

When revisiting the genre, Namco-Bandai knew it couldn't expect more help from playground designer, Keita Takahashi, who had left the company on a sabbatical to build children's playgrounds in Tibet. The issue was a serious one: *Katamari*'s quirkiness had a shelf life and new input was needed if the franchise was to be sufficiently milked. Then a brilliant idea struck executives and they set out to recruit another master of a hands-on craft.

Jebediah Klipfer is part of a long lineage of barn builders. His great grandfather once raised the largest barn in the entire state and his family has continued the tradition ever since. After erecting a barn for 747s at three major US airports, he was approached by the publisher to come up with concepts for the next *Katamari* game. These have/will/soon revitalise(d) the game and brought/will bring a new lease of life for the prince , his cousins and the king of the cosmos.

"All of that is of course devil worship," Jebediah remarked, adding that he doesn't intend to make another one. But the publisher might have other plans if the latest game proves successful. Interestingly enough, Jebediah, who shuns next-generation game consoles, has never seen his creation. But he said he figured that the development team made enough sense of his notes.

"They never asked questions. I would just keep telling stories about building barns when the Namco guy was here, and they'd use all of that." Some critics have pointed out that *Beautiful Katamari* doesn't seem to contain anything about barn building, but the publisher retorted by accusing the critics of cultural insensitivity. In a statement, it countered that "if observers can't see the influence of Amish tradition in the latest super-hot and much-loved *Katamari* title, they should maybe research these fascinating people a bit better." Ü

THE SIMS BLAMED FOR WOMAN STARTING FAMILY

Betty Allridge was your typical modern woman, embracing lacy underwear and stern but fashionable business attire as a harmonious combination. Every day she would prosper at her job, sip lattés at lunch with colleagues, make snappy PowerPoint presentations, and go on the occasional date with a different hot model-type stud.

"She was definitely management material," said a co-worker who preferred to remain anonymous. "She was a terrific project manager and could really shift paradigms to bring a working solution for both our clients and the company, all while flying our flag high." But this successful account manager's ambitions were cut short when she was introduced to *The Sims*, a life management game from publisher Electronic Arts.

"It was nothing big at first," her former housemate, Rosy Brill, told Reuters. "But she soon became dependent on the game to vent her anxiety. The first major fallout was when her textile stocks fell after a rough trade day. She lost a bit of money, so she made Sims for key Wall Street bankers and locked them in a room, which she then set alight." This morbid act seemed to have spurned Betty deeper into the game's comfort zone. Eventually, she stopped mucking about with petty vengeance scenes and moved into the core premise, which is to manage a family of house occupants. Then, unexpectedly, she quit her job, moved to a suburban house and started a family. The family, which occupied the house before she arrived, was quite startled at first.

"She keeps trying to make us do stuff," explained Sandy, the family's mom. "It was annoying at first, but we eventually realised that we could just act stupid and she'd end up doing the tasks for us. She even got [the dad] Dan a job – he's been unemployed for years!" Betty's former colleagues blame EA's game for this, arguing that it had influenced her and changed her personality.

"They should put warnings on it," another one of her co-workers mused. "Something about how it will ruin your cosmopolitan principles." EA, when asked for comment, refuted this, saying that there is no proven link between playing *The Sims* and loss of go-getter instincts. Ü

Cover Story: Super Secret MGS 4 Fact!

Sources close to the Konami team developing *Metal Gear Solid 4* have, under duress, revealed that Solid Snake will smoke PLAIN cigarettes in the game! Now that's a REAL man. You read it here first!

Tom Clancy's
SPLINTER CELL
CONVICTION